

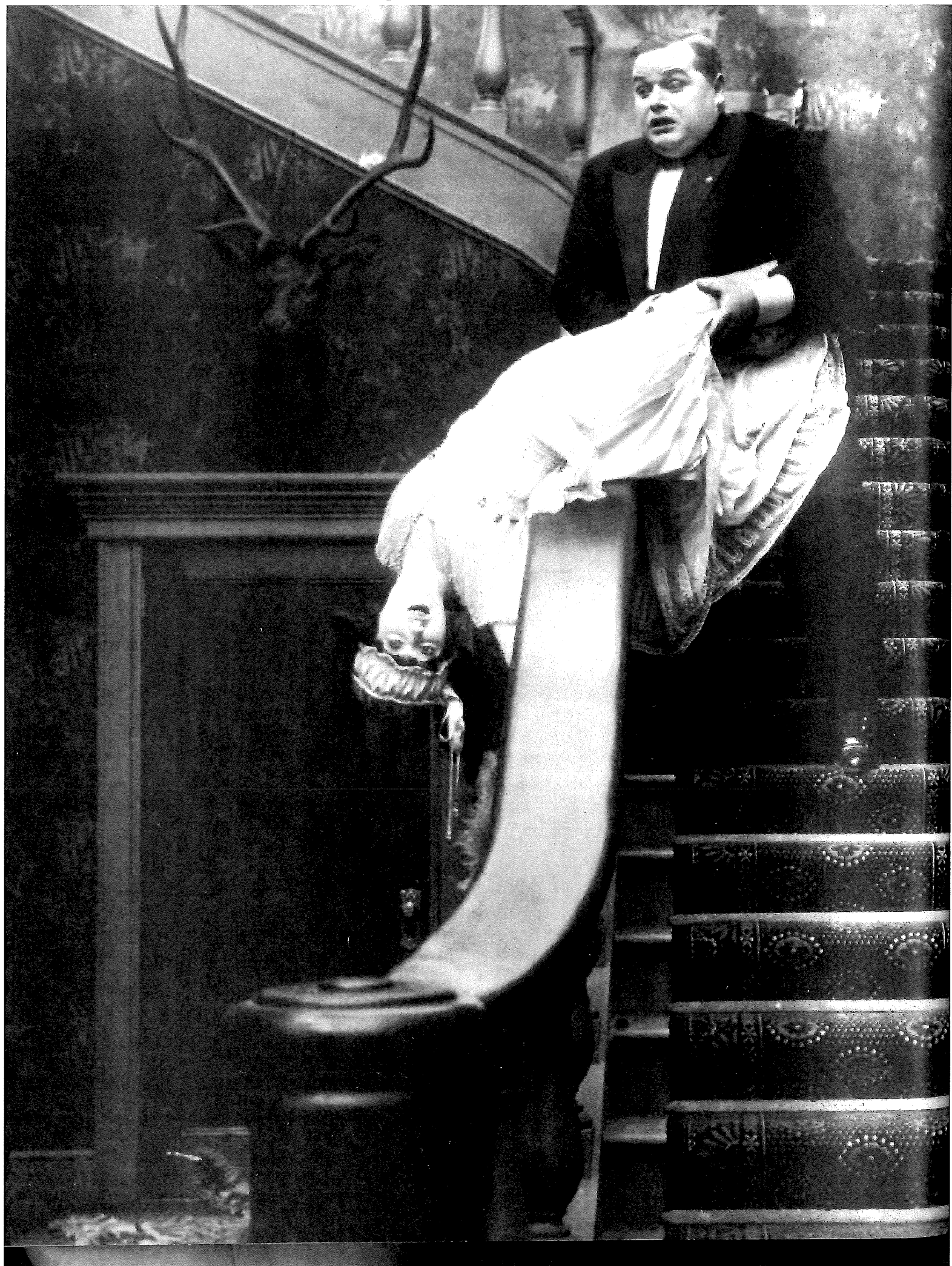
The background of the cover is a detailed black and white illustration of a complex industrial machine, possibly a steam engine or a large-scale manufacturing component. It features large, interlocking gears, a worker standing on a platform, and various mechanical parts. The style is reminiscent of early 20th-century industrial photography or technical drawings.

AMERICAN FILM A HISTORY

JON LEWIS



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK • LONDON



2

The Silent Era

1915–1928

The movies came of age in the United States just as the country entered an era of conspicuous consumption: the so-called Jazz Age, or the Roaring Twenties. This modern age saw America in ascent, rebounding from World War I, when the mobilization of troops and industry for the war effort and daily worries about the combat overseas had dominated the American political, economic, and cultural scene. Following its decisive participation in the war, the United States at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century was poised to take full advantage of its newfound global influence.

In concert with the dramatic postwar economic boom, the stock market soared, fueling public confidence in the American dream of prosperity and opportunity. But all was not so simple or so easy on the home front. Indeed, from the end of the war, in 1918, to the crash of the stock market, in 1929, the United States struggled with dramatic social change, its citizens torn between modernization and increased social freedom on the one hand and a grassroots conservatism on the other. This was the era of labor unionism and labor reform and women's suffrage (the Constitution finally guaranteed women the right to vote in 1920). But at the same time this was an era of increased social regulation: Prohibition, a nationwide ban on the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, went into effect in 1920, and the National Origins Act of 1924 severely limited the number of immigrants entering the United States from southern and eastern Europe and prohibited new immigration from Asia.

For the many immigrants who struggled in America's cities at the time, cinema continued to be the most inclusive, the most relevant, and the most inspiring medium available to them. Cinema comprised images



Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and
Mabel Normand in *He Did and He
Didn't* (Arbuckle, 1916).

that could be understood independent of one's native tongue, and the gestures of the actors on-screen were universally recognizable, no matter where one was from or what language one spoke. In 1920 over three quarters of the residents of New York City, the capital of film exhibition at the time, were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. In Chicago, the second biggest market, 70 percent of audience members were likewise immigrants or children of immigrants.

Stardom became fundamental to the art and business of American movies as stars came to epitomize the new American ideal of beauty, wealth, and conspicuous consumption. Many of the principal players in the rags-to-riches scenarios presented on-screen—Rudolph Valentino and Theda Bara, for example—were themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants. Others—Douglas Fairbanks, Wallace Reid, Tom Mix, and Mary Pickford—represented an all-American ideal to which immigrants might aspire.

At the same time the celebration of movie stars by the national press and the emulation of them by filmgoers became a source of anxiety among conservatives who worried about a loosening of traditional standards and values. The public's struggle with stardom came to characterize a larger, more philosophical struggle with success in general. Could too much prosperity—too much fun—be a problem? The answer to that question came soon enough, as a series of scandals in the early 1920s, involving suicide, rape, murder, drug addiction, and homosexuality, rocked the Hollywood colony. Bowing to public pressure from conservative "reformers" who had predicted all along that the social abandon of the period had come at a price, the studios reined in their stars, and a new era of self-regulation was born. In the wake of the star scandals, the studios formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) and hired a former postmaster general, Will Hays, to run the organization. Through the MPPDA the studios set out to accomplish two things: modernize the industry (mostly by controlling the labor force, especially its highest-profile laborers: its movie stars) and establish good public relations by monitoring the content of American movies.

With self-regulation came significantly greater control over the production, distribution, and exhibition of American cinema by studio management. For the men behind the new studio system, the Hollywood moguls, a second rags-to-riches story applied. Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Adolph Zukor, Marcus Loew, and the Warner brothers (Sam, Harry, Jack, and Albert) were eastern European Jewish immigrants who first found success in the exhibition business. They ventured west as part of a larger strategy to challenge the Motion Picture Patents Company trust. But once they gained the upper hand, around 1915, their Hollywood studios—Universal, 20th Century-Fox, Paramount, MGM, and Warner Bros., respectively—quickly evolved into monopolies in their own right. By the early 1920s, with the adoption of the MPPDA, the studios operated much as the MPPC had ten years earlier—as an industry cartel that limited competition and standardized policies, procedures, and product lines.

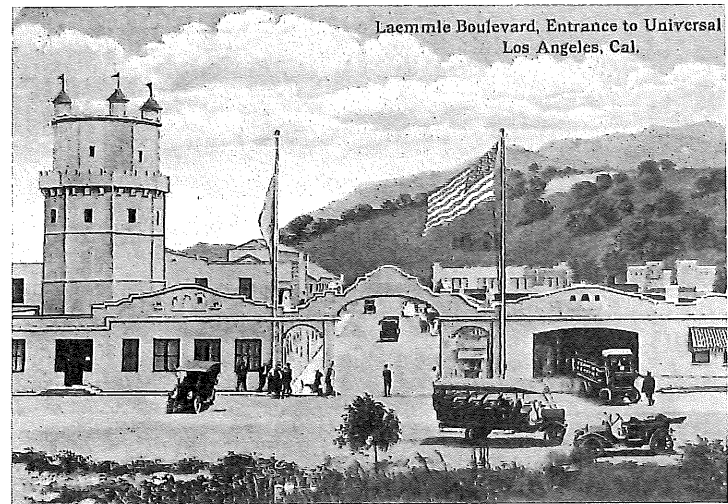
As we look back on those years, it is important to remember that none of the studio moguls were artists; none were filmmakers. They were instead hard-nosed businessmen with unbridled confidence in the commercial value of the product their companies produced and a keen understanding of the audience they served. The moguls ran their studios by the seat of their pants, sensing that the marketplace comprised lots of folks much like them, or at least much like they had been before their success in the motion-picture business. Self-regulation gave the moguls only more power and more control, making the emergence of a first wave of film artists all the more remarkable.

Hugely influential in this era were the directors D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Erich von Stroheim, and F. W. Murnau, the producer Thomas Ince, and the film-comedy pioneers Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd, all of whom produced work that achieved greatness despite the restrictive system in which they operated. Their films, more than any others, have come to characterize the era, perhaps because they transcended the social contradictions of the age or perhaps because they laid bare those contradictions in ways the American moviegoing audience could understand and appreciate.

A STUDIO INDUSTRY IS BORN

In March 1915, Carl Laemmle moved his company's production facilities to Universal City, a massive studio complex built on a 230-acre ranch in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Hollywood. The studio sported the largest shooting stage in the world (65 feet by 300 feet) and another almost as big (50 feet by 200 feet), several open-air stages with various exterior sets (city streets, a country lane, and so on), a huge back lot for location work, a film-processing lab, prop rooms, editing suites, and even a zoo. If there is a moment in film history that can be said to have begun the Hollywood studio era, this moment in the early spring of 1915 is it.

Like virtually all of the West Coast studios, Universal maintained business offices in New York. Managing a bicoastal company in those days—before commercial air travel was established—was a much more difficult task than it is today. In response to the difficulties, Laemmle decided in 1918 to delegate his authority over the day-to-day operation of the West Coast studio to Irving Thalberg, his nineteen-year-old former secretary. Although impossibly young, Thalberg seemed to have an instinctive understanding of the movie business. He whipped the unruly mess that was Universal City into shape, taking control from



An artist's rendering of Universal City in the 1920s.

Maurice Fleckles and Isidore Bernstein, relatives Laemmle had first put in charge on the West Coast.

Unfortunately, Laemmle's daring decision to promote Thalberg wasn't matched by daring decision making about the sort of films Universal would make. Thalberg brought order to Universal, but the studio lacked a vision to match his managerial skills. He urged Laemmle to take advantage of both the market for A features and the impressive new facilities he had built, but Laemmle remained wedded to the idea of a balanced program. Frustrated by his boss's refusal to profit from the new studio facility and the burgeoning new feature-film marketplace, Thalberg left Universal in 1923 to work for Louis B. Mayer, a move that proved fortunate, for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) would be formed less than a year later (discussed below), and Thalberg would become the key executive responsible for that studio's rise.

Thalberg's exit from Universal was the first in what would become a long line of departures from that studio. It soon became a place where stars were born and from which they then moved on: the actors Rudolph Valentino, Lon Chaney, and Mae Murray and the directors John Ford and Rex Ingram all left Universal to make bigger films elsewhere. Laemmle was a visionary in the struggle with the MPPC but proved to be an uninspired studio mogul, an especially surprising story given the facility he built and the town—Hollywood—he helped put on the map.



Carl Laemmle (center) leads the opening-day parade at Universal City, March 1915.



Irving Thalberg, the “boy wonder” behind MGM’s success, photographed in 1936.

While Universal clung to the old programming model, the other studios moved headlong into the A-feature market. Fox, for example, which made only four features in 1914, produced seventy-three in 1918. Fox also expanded its holdings in the exhibition business. By the end of the 1920s, Fox owned over five hundred movie houses, many of which were so-called showcase theaters, urban movie palaces at which the studios routinely opened their films. Fox’s expansion set the tone for several of the other new studios: from about 1917 to 1923, Paramount, First National, and Loew’s all expanded their theater businesses. Universal, the one-time leader in the move west, lagged behind here as well. It was not until the mid-1920s that Universal would have its own chain of theaters.

Another key player in the early years was the showcase-theater entrepreneur Marcus Loew, who integrated his holdings in the film business in the early 1920s to form the first modern studio trust. In 1920, Loew purchased Metro Pictures, a film exchange (a company that brokered licensed film rentals), which, combined with his East Coast

theater chain (Loew’s Theatrical Enterprises), established significant positions for the future studio in both the distribution and the exhibition aspects of the business. In 1924, Loew expanded further by purchasing first Samuel Goldwyn’s production facility in Culver City and then Louis B. Mayer Pictures, thus forming a new production-distribution-exhibition studio, which he named Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, or MGM. Loew delegated authority over the studio to three men: Nicholas Schenck, his right-hand man; Louis B. Mayer, a tough-talking, street-smart former junk dealer and nickelodeon owner; and Irving Thalberg, Universal’s former “boy wonder.” MGM became the silent era’s great success story, in no small part because of Loew’s appreciation for the value of first-run exhibition and vertical corporate integration.

The studio system that evolved during the silent era was built on standardized and professionalized policies and procedures, mainly because the Wall Street investors upon whom the studios increasingly depended were more impressed by bottom-line profits than by the glamour and glitz of the emerging movie colony. Also important was the establishment of a system by which the studios might better control the growing industry workforce. Feature moviemaking was, and is, a labor-intensive undertaking, and the studio system, built on exclusive contracts (with movie stars and movie directors, as well as carpenters, scene painters, and hairdressers), was the best way to keep costs down and profits up.

Movie Stars: Mary Pickford, Theda Bara, and Rudolph Valentino

Laemmle’s famous quip about movie stars’ being “the fundamental thing” in the industry remained a core studio concept throughout the silent era. Indeed, the studios soon came to value stars not only as a marketing attraction but also as the public face of the industry. Studio moguls at the time were hardly the sort of guys middle America much cared for, so Hollywood’s public image as a place where the likes of Mary Pickford, Theda Bara, and Rudolph Valentino lived and loved went a long way toward making the entire industry a site of American aspiration and fantasy.

Mary Pickford became the fledgling industry’s second female movie star—a bigger and, by most



Mary Pickford c. 1915.



Theda Bara, silent cinema's notorious vamp.

accounts, happier star than her predecessor, Florence Lawrence. Pickford's rise to fame was a rags-to-riches story, much like the story line of her movies: she was initially noticed because of her youthful good looks, but she succeeded where other pretty girls failed because she had what was called gumption or pluck. By the time she turned twenty, Pickford had made over 175 films. She was twenty-five (but looked much younger) when she appeared in two of her best-known features, *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (Maurice Tourneur, 1917) and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (Marshall Neilan, 1917), and twenty-six when she appeared in one of the era's signature melodramas, *Stella Maris* (Neilan, 1918). Pickford continued to be cast as a girl even as she approached thirty. Once such casting became unsustainable, her star status quickly faded.

Pickford is important in the history of stardom because she was so successful in parlaying her celebrity into power in the industry. She began her career in 1908 as a bit player earning \$5 a week, eventually landing at Biograph, where she worked with Griffith. Her salary increased along with her popularity. In 1913 her films headlined Adolph

Zukor's Famous Players production company, and her salary soared to \$2,000 a week. Zukor gave Pickford, by then earning \$10,000 per film, her own label, the special distribution unit Artcraft, so that she could better maintain the quality of her productions. Artcraft came with a guarantee of marketability (based on Pickford's popularity) and a guarantee of a certain quality of production: only the most talented filmmakers at Famous Players—the directors Maurice Tourneur, Marshall Neilan, and Cecil B. DeMille and the writer Frances Marion—were used in Artcraft's films.

In 1919, Pickford took the next logical step. In partnership with her husband-to-be and fellow movie star, Douglas Fairbanks, the comedy actor and director Charlie Chaplin, and the director D. W. Griffith, Pickford founded United Artists, a company that initially promised to give these elite creative moviemakers control over the development, production, and marketing of their own motion pictures. It was a good idea, but the company failed to fulfill its promise. By 1925 the four principals had turned the day-to-day operation of the studio over to a savvy Hollywood player, Joseph Schenck, who helped fashion United Artists into a modern distribution (as opposed to production) company. Much later, in 1951, Pickford and Chaplin sold their shares in the company to the businessmen Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin, who retained the name but not the spirit of the artists' studio project.

Pickford's popularity made clear that the studios should be in the business of making stars as well as movies. Her name above the title of a film guaranteed audience interest and financial success. In the hunt for a hedge against the vagaries of the film marketplace and the caprice of the American filmgoer, the studios searched desperately for stars. Because demand soon outstripped supply, the studios quickly adopted a more aggressive strategy, "manufacturing" stars to headline their product lines. One of the first studio-made stars was Theda Bara. Born Theodosia Goodman, the daughter of Polish Jewish immigrants living in Cincinnati, Bara was discovered by the film director Frank Powell. She was by then a veteran of bit parts on Broadway and had had stints as an extra in a couple of Hollywood pictures. Although she was already thirty years old when Powell "discovered" her, the director saw star potential in her dark "exotic" look. At Powell's urging, Fox put

Goodman under contract and launched the newly christened Theda Bara as the next new thing, concocting a crazy backstory that described her as the daughter of an artist (her father was a tailor) and an Arabian princess who practiced "the black arts." Bara was a willing player in the studio's far-fetched promotional strategy. She posed for publicity photos with snakes and human skulls, playing a new sort of celebrity game, one in which a nice Jewish girl from the Midwest might be reinvented as an exotic temptress.

Bara's signature role was "the vampire" in Powell's *A Fool There Was* (1915), her first film performance of any substance. The picture tells the story of a woman who lives to seduce and destroy powerful men. Bara's principal target in the movie is an ambassador whose picture in the newspaper captures her interest. When she first comes across his photograph, she is already planning to dump her lover, whom we find doddering around her house, talking about how much he once loved her and how she has destroyed him. When the vamp boards an ocean liner with her eye on her new prey, the old lover follows close behind to declare his desperation one last time—and then blow his brains out.

Two scenes in the film stand out. The first key scene shows Bara in her boudoir in a flimsy nightgown. As it falls off her shoulders, she shows little concern for propriety, as if the Victorian codes that governed women's dress and comportment did not matter to her. The second key scene may come as a surprise to anyone seeing a vamp film for the first time: Well after the vampire seduces the ambassador away from his wife, the man's daughter comes to the vampire's house to beg her father to return home. Despite her tugging at his (and the audience's) heartstrings, he turns her down. The moral is firmly drawn: if you fall for a woman like the vampire in *A Fool There Was*, nothing, not even the love for your own child, can save you.

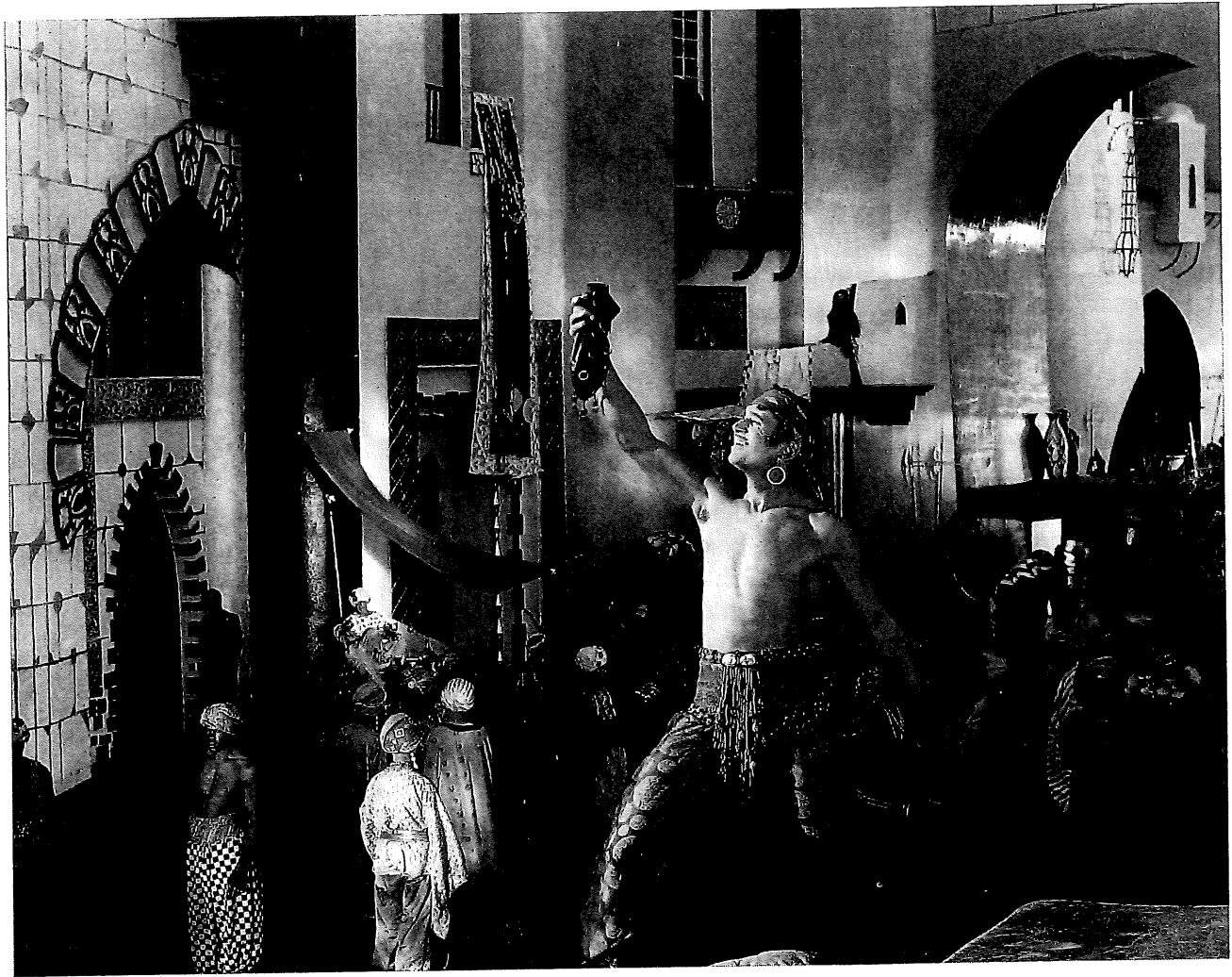
Among Hollywood's men, the star with the most transcendent sexual celebrity was Rudolph Valentino. Named at birth Rodolfo Alfonzo Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentina D'Antonguolla, Valentino was a former busboy and taxi dancer (hired to do the tango with women for 10¢ a dance) in New York City who was discovered by Adolph Zukor in the early 1920s. He starred in fourteen films between 1921 (his celebrated debut in Rex Ingram's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*)



Rudolph Valentino, silent cinema's most ardently desired male star.

and 1926, when he died suddenly at thirty-one of a perforated ulcer. Valentino played romantic and exotic characters in most of his films—for example, a matador in *Blood and Sand* (Fred Niblo, 1922) and a wealthy European doubling as a wealthy Middle Easterner in *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, 1926). His Mediterranean good looks—dark skin, aquiline nose, piercing eyes—served any number of mysterious stereotypes, most notably that of the Latin lover.

Valentino's star persona was from the start more complex than Bara's. Both on-screen and in fan magazines, Valentino was the epitome of male attractiveness and sex appeal as well as a lonely guy lost in a desperate search for the right woman to save him from a life wasted dancing the tango or fighting bulls or playing typecast roles in the movies. Like a number of late-twentieth-century male pop stars (David Bowie and Prince, for example), Valentino played with androgyny. He was astonishingly popular with female audiences through the first half of the Roaring Twenties and decidedly unpopular with male audiences and the



The swashbuckler hero Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh, 1924).

tough-guy newsmen from the mainstream press who covered the Hollywood beat. Those journalists routinely referred to Valentino as a “powder puff” and encouraged doubts about the star’s sexual preference.

Part of Valentino’s appeal to women, no doubt, was the product of his androgynous and conflicted persona. For example, he was lit and shot in ways that had been used by filmmakers to highlight the sex appeal of female stars of the era. Even when he was the sexual aggressor, as in the strange abduction scene in *The Sheik*, female fans saw something behind the façade of the character, something that transcended the film and told them all they needed to know about the man playing the role.

By way of contrast, we can consider the star personae of Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks, the swashbuckling hero in films like *The Three Muske-*

teers (Niblo, 1921), *Robin Hood* (Allan Dwan, 1922), and *The Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh, 1924). Fairbanks, like many of the stars of the early westerns—Tom Mix in *The Cyclone* (Clifford Smith, 1920) and William S. Hart in *The Return of Draw Egan* (William S. Hart, 1916)—and all those square-jawed silent leading men—Wallace Reid in *The Affairs of Anatole* (DeMille, 1921), for example—was a quintessential American type: instinctive, rugged, and fiercely independent. Valentino, on the other hand, was Continental and cosmopolitan—decidedly not American. Fairbanks’s off-screen romance with Mary Pickford was the stuff of American fantasy: he and Pickford were the perfect happy, rich, fun-loving celebrity couple. Valentino’s personal life was the stuff of fascination as well, though the story was neither so happy nor so simple. In 1922 the actor was jailed and

then fined for bigamy. After two failed marriages (to the actresses Jean Acker and Natacha Rambova), he took up with his co-star Vilma Bánky and the notorious screen vamp Pola Negri. In the months before his death, Valentino seemed to crack under the scrutiny and pressure of stardom, at one point challenging a Chicago newsman to a fistfight to settle the matter of his manhood once and for all.

Because Valentino died suddenly and young, rumors predictably hinted at death by poison at the hands of a cuckolded husband and other steamy scenarios stolen from one or another of the actor's screen melodramas. Whatever the facts were, many of his most ardent fans believed that he had been killed by the pressures of stardom, by the need to maintain the celebrity of Valentino. Even (or especially) in death, Valentino's tragic image transcended reason, reality, and common sense. Eighty thousand mourners descended on his New York funeral. Women lined the streets to witness the subsequent cortege in Los Angeles, and for a generation after his death his grave was a site for lonely female pilgrims who could not shake his mysterious hold over them.

The public's fascination with movie stars made the studios money, but the glamour industry that sustained stardom was not without its pitfalls. Especially troubling for studio executives was a seeming shift of power within the industry, away from them and toward the celebrity actors. By the early 1920s many stars had their own production units within the larger studios. Their demands had to be taken seriously because their value to the studios and to the industry as a whole was clear. But the moguls were not so eager to surrender their power. A spate of celebrity scandals ensured that they wouldn't have to.

Movie-Star Scandals

As early as 1913, approximately a year before the first features were screened before paying audiences, a fan-magazine subculture had emerged to answer the pressing question, What do movie stars do when they're not working? At first the studios controlled press releases and the distribution of stories about the stars. Thus the stories published in early fan magazines focused on the conventionality, stability, and normalcy of screen performers,

echoing the melodramatic scenarios that prevailed in the films of the time: the world is fraught with temptation, and only the stars' virtue, beauty, and talent enable them to endure.

As the aptly named Roaring Twenties approached, however, the fan magazines increasingly celebrated postwar prosperity, touting various stars' extravagance and conspicuous consumption. Stars were spending more and partying more, and fans were eager to learn every detail. Sensing a market opportunity, mainstream newspapers began to run gossip and news items about Hollywood's celebrity culture. Unlike the early fan magazines, the major newspapers weren't dependent on the studios for their stories, so the studios began to lose their ability to control what was reported about their stars.

The first major star scandal involved Olive Thomas, a former Ziegfeld *Follies* showgirl under contract to Selznick Pictures, who died in 1920 of an apparent drug overdose at the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris. Thomas was married to Jack Pickford, Mary's brother (who was also rumored to be involved with drugs), a fact that made her death bigger news than it might otherwise have been. In response to the news of Thomas's death, Archbishop George Mundelein, one of many Catholic clerics who attempted to reform and regulate the early motion-picture industry, published a tract, *The Danger of Hollywood: A Warning to Young Girls*, that proved prescient.

Perhaps the most lurid of the celebrity scandals involved Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, who allegedly raped and murdered the starlet Virginia Rappe during a wild party that began in Los Angeles and ended nearly 400 miles away, at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. Arbuckle was singled out as her killer, but he was never convicted of the crime, largely because no one at the party could accurately recollect much of anything from the night in question. Whatever the actual circumstances of Rappe's death were, Arbuckle became a scapegoat for "crimes" committed by the movie colony against proper American society. He later found work (thanks to Buster Keaton and other friends) as a gag writer and low-budget film director, but Paramount pulled Arbuckle's films from circulation after the trial. Arbuckle's Hollywood career, as a movie star at least, was all but over after 1922.

Also in the news in the early 1920s were the film director William Desmond Taylor's unsolved murder and the movie star Wallace Reid's death from pneumonia, apparently due to a drug overdose. When Taylor was discovered murdered in his Hollywood bungalow, neighbors called his studio to report the crime. Only after going through his rooms themselves did the studio operatives call the police. What the police found in the apartment was surprising because it incriminated Taylor in a romance with the film stars Mabel Normand (whose love letters to Taylor were easily identified) and Mary Miles Minter (whose monogrammed underpants were apparently kept by Taylor as a souvenir). Historians now contend that the studio, in order to cover up the real story—that Taylor was gay—planted the love letters and the underwear and suggest that his murder may well have had something to do with his secret other life. Reid's death from a longtime addiction to narcotics was a disconcerting shock to his many fans, who considered him a quintessentially all-American movie star.



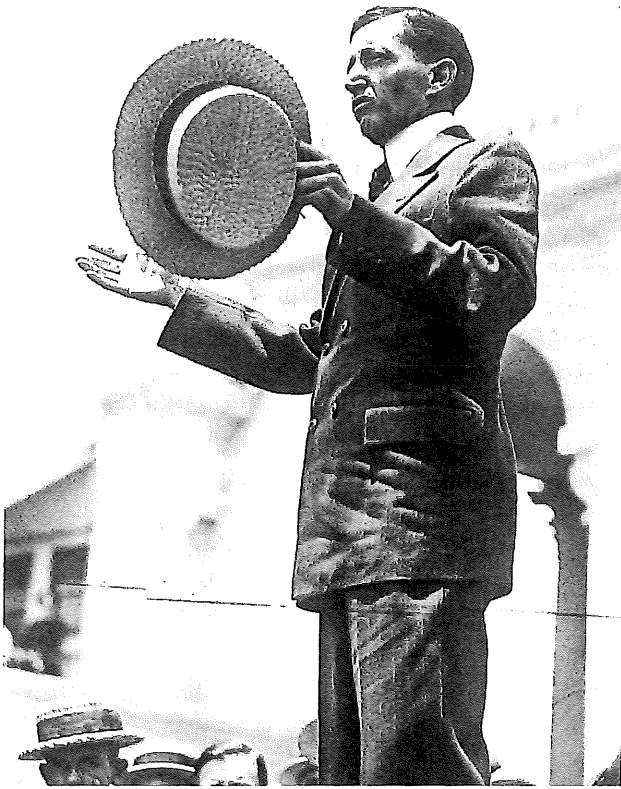
The star scandals prompted editorials nationwide condemning the Hollywood film colony. Women's clubs, religious groups, and other reform organizations threatened boycotts of motion pictures unless the studios got "their" stars under control. The prevailing view held that people in the movie business made too much money and the independence and power that the wealth brought them also corrupted them. Studio moguls used the scandals to rein in their stars, many of whom made a lot of money and wielded a lot of power in the industry. In 1922 the studios began insisting on morality clauses in their contracts with talent. Such clauses called further attention to the overlap in the lives of the stars on and off the screen and protected the studios from having to pay out a star's contract if he or she was involved in a scandal. The lesson of these scandals—one that the studios made sure the actors couldn't ignore—was that no star was too big to be brought down by public outrage.

Will Hays and the MPPDA

In 1922, in response to public pressure following the star scandals, the studios established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Chosen by the studios to run this new industry trade organization was a former postmaster general, Will Hays. His mandate—a challenging public relations job—was to convince grassroots organizations and conservative legislators across the country that the industry wanted what they wanted: a scandal-free Hollywood that produced films that were at once entertaining and socially responsible.

The MPPDA's first significant act was to take credit for Paramount's nationwide ban on Arbuckle's movies. When the Arbuckle scandal broke, thirty-six state legislatures were considering film-censorship bills. The MPPDA's swift action in support of the ban on Arbuckle's films, as well as its success in preventing independent exhibitors from screening exploitative retrospectives of Virginia Rappe's films, was a first step in a larger effort to self-regulate film content. The promise of self-regulation under the auspices of Will Hays and the

Fatty Arbuckle in a publicity photograph taken shortly before the scandal in 1921 that ruined his career.



Will Hays, chief of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), giving a speech during his first "inspection tour" of Hollywood in 1922.

MPPDA succeeded in diminishing the threat of widespread state and local censorship. By 1925 thirty-five of the thirty-six states contemplating film censorship had abandoned their efforts, apparently deciding that the task was best left to Hays and his organization.

Hays's appointment seemed at the time to parallel major-league baseball's selection of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis as its first commissioner. Landis's appointment was a consequence of the infamous 1919 Black Sox scandal, in which a number of Chicago White Sox players took money from gangsters in exchange for deliberately losing the World Series. Much as the baseball owners used Landis's sober, no-nonsense image to restore the public's faith in America's pastime, the studios used Hays's squeaky-clean public image to legitimate the movie industry.

Hays's mandate was not just to clean house but to establish the MPPDA as a strong industry trade organization. The newspapers, of course, characterized his appointment as a moral crusade. That the two tasks—modernizing industry operations and

self-regulating content—were somehow related, even indistinguishable, would become apparent in the years to come (a matter discussed at length in Chapter 3).

MOVIEMAKING AND MOVIEMAKERS

In the period of early cinema (1893–1914), screen credit for directing a movie was routinely omitted. Films opened with a corporate logo, not a director's name, so corporate ownership more or less equaled authorship. In the silent era (1915–1928), however, crediting movie directors on-screen became more commonplace. A movie was still said to be an MGM film or a Paramount film, and few in the film-going public paid much attention to the director's name as it scrolled down the screen, but the mere fact that directors and other filmmaking personnel were acknowledged was a significant change.

D. W. Griffith was the first American director to be as well known as the films he directed, and he was among the very first to insist that filmmaking was an art form. The only other dramatic film directors as well known at the time were Cecil B. DeMille, who made a range of popular genre films that nonetheless revealed a unique creative signature, and Erich von Stroheim, who as director, writer, and star took full control of his films—and paid dearly for his artistic hubris. Somewhat less well known (but no less important as filmmakers) were the creative producer Thomas H. Ince, who, like Mack Sennett, imposed his signature on his studio's films, and the German-born F. W. Murnau, who brought a Continental style to the final years of American silent cinema.

Film histories tend to focus on those directors whose work transcended the restrictions of the studio system, largely ignoring a number of mostly anonymous "studio directors" who produced the vast majority of motion pictures in the silent era. Among the most important of the lesser-known studio directors were Maurice Tourneur, Marshall Neilan, Rex Ingram, Clarence Brown, Allan Dwan, Mauritz Stiller, Fred Niblo, King Vidor, Raoul Walsh, and Henry King. Finally, behind the scenes in the silent era were the screenwriters, many of whom were women. Indeed, among the most successful writers in Hollywood at the time were June Mathis, Frances Marion, and Jeanie Macpherson.



D. W. Griffith, photographed in the 1920s.

D. W. Griffith

Griffith was the most famous director of the silent era. He was also among the first to demand screen credit for his work and push for the move to feature filmmaking. By 1915, when he made his best-known feature, *The Birth of a Nation*, he was already the industry's most famous cineaste.

The Birth of a Nation premiered in February 1915 in Los Angeles and a month later in New York. It was a sensation—the industry's first blockbuster. The film's initial run in New York lasted an astonishing forty-seven weeks despite an unprecedented \$2 ticket price. President Woodrow Wilson screened the film at the White House, ostensibly to see what everyone was talking about, and legend has it he remarked that Griffith was "writing history with lightning."

But while the picture made Griffith famous, it also set him up for controversy. Reviewers were quick to acknowledge the film's undeniable technical brilliance, but many balked at its politics. The public was similarly split: the film was at once a box-office sensation and a cause célèbre. The intran-

sigent racism and bigotry that pervade *The Birth of a Nation* (which was based on Thomas Dixon's incendiary book *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*) prompted protests in the Northeast, several of which were organized by former abolitionists. Pressure from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) forced Griffith to cut a few of the many objectionable sequences, and street protests prompted local licensing boards in Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Kansas, and Ohio to refuse theaters permission to screen the film.

The Birth of a Nation begins with a prologue that audaciously blames the institution of slavery on the northern slave traders of the seventeenth century. Those men who trafficked in the slave trade were, Griffith muses, the great-great-grandparents of the nineteenth-century abolitionists who helped set the country's course as it headed toward the Civil War. Such northern hypocrisy is juxtaposed with the genteel, idyllic southern way of life, which was destroyed by the war.

The film introduces two families: the Stonemans (whose patriarch is Austin Stoneman, an abolitionist senator played by Ralph Lewis) and the Camerons (South Carolina plantation owners). In what was a predictable melodramatic plot device even in 1915, Phil Stoneman (Elmer Clifton), Austin's son, falls in love with Margaret Cameron (Miriam Cooper), and although all he has to go on is a photograph, Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) falls in love with Phil's sister, Elsie (Lillian Gish). Complications ensue as the North and South go to war.

The long Civil War segment of the film is pure spectacle. But unlike previous film spectacles, like *Quo Vadis?*, which simply parade actors and extras in opulent costumes in front of mostly stationary cameras, Griffith found (and frequently alternated) camera positions that enhanced his film's epic look. In the scene that re-creates William Tecumseh Sherman's march to the sea, for example, Griffith covered the action with a variety of camera shots and positions, including a telling shot from atop a hill overlooking the assembled regiment, which offers scale to the massive onslaught. That Griffith also fully appreciated and

exploited the ways in which editing might be used to heighten a scene's intensity is evident in the action editing (the use of multiple camera positions and accelerated intercutting) in the Battle of Petersburg and burning-of-Atlanta sequences. Although they are scenes of war and carnage, they are nonetheless exhilarating to watch.

The war segment ends with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater, re-created by Griffith with an eye to historical accuracy. Griffith employed his trademark intercutting to identify the parallel scenes that inexorably culminate in the assassination. Using fifty-five separate shots, Griffith intercut images of President Lincoln (Joseph Henabery) sitting innocently in his theater box, John Wilkes Booth (played by the director Raoul Walsh) bidding his time outside, the president's bodyguard asleep on the job, the audience as a whole, Phil and Elsie (in the Ford Theater's

audience), and the play, *Our American Cousin*, being performed onstage.

Griffith's painstaking verisimilitude suggesting historical accuracy contrasts with several specious and ridiculous musings on the political history of the late-nineteenth-century South. For example, to illustrate what he saw as the injustice of Reconstruction (the period following the South's capitulation to the North), Griffith offers a shot of the actual South Carolina capitol and then dissolves to a scene of its takeover by itinerant African Americans (played by whites in blackface), whose slovenly, savage comportment betrays a disrespect for this symbol of government and a disregard for the laws and traditions of the South. The African American legislators strip southern whites of their land and, even more dangerously, enact laws allowing interracial marriage. At the introduction of the dreaded subject of miscegenation (race mixing),



D. W. Griffith directing *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915.



(top) The rousing Civil War re-creations in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) ably displayed D. W. Griffith's sophistication as a filmmaker.



(bottom) In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), D. W. Griffith dramatized historical events by means of carefully staged reenactments. Here we see the signing of the South's surrender at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

Griffith offers a sight-line cut (a shot of someone looking at something followed by a shot of what that person is looking at) that shows an African American legislator leering at a group of young white women in the capitol gallery.

As the film looks at the postwar period, Griffith focuses on Ben Cameron, a loyal son of the South who becomes so frustrated by what the former slaves have made of his home that he forms a secret society composed of similarly disenfranchised and disturbed white men who take to wear-

ing sheets to conceal their identity. Those men become vigilantes and endeavor to defend their "Aryan" birthright. The Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation* is as violent as its incarnation in the America of Griffith's day, but according to Griffith's version of events the Klan is violent not because of unreasonable hatred but because in the era of Reconstruction violence became necessary to the very survival of white southerners. *The Birth of a Nation* presents the Klan as an organization whose members are characterized by honor and courage and whose *raison d'être* is justifiable self-defense.

Shifting from the macrohistory of the reconstructed South to the micro- (and fictional) history of the Cameron and Stoneman families, Griffith has an emancipated black man, Gus (Walter Long, a white actor playing the role in blackface) ardently pursue Ben's sister, Flora (Mae Marsh), in a chase scene that culminates in Flora's desperate suicidal leap off a cliff to escape Gus's advances. Critics and historians have often commented on this sequence because it is at once masterfully shot (it's difficult not to appreciate the skill with which it was made), exciting (it successfully enlists us in rooting for the object of the chase), and profoundly offensive (as it in effect justifies the Klan's racist violence, a violence for which we indirectly and perhaps unwillingly cheer). Following Flora's death, Gus is caught and lynched, a scenario that is, for good reason, offensive to today's audiences familiar with the ugly history of American race relations in the post-Civil War South.

The racism that pervades *The Birth of a Nation* makes Griffith a difficult director to appreciate. But to understand, if not appreciate, his importance and influence, we must look past the stories and the themes (and perhaps the man himself) and examine instead the stylistic innovation, Griffith's role in the development of what might be called a modern cinematic grammar or language. More than any other director of his

generation, Griffith appreciated how camera position, especially the distance between the camera and its subject, was a matter of primary aesthetic import. In the Civil War battle sequences, for example, Griffith cuts from distant establishing shots offering the battleground as a whole to medium close-ups of individual soldiers. In another part of the Civil War segment, an iris shot (so called because it opens and shuts like an eye) focuses on a sorrowful woman. As the iris opens to fill the screen, we see more of the woman—and the source of her dismay: General Sherman's inexorable and bloody march to the sea. In the exciting rescue of the Camerons by the Klan, Griffith uses alternating focal lengths, multiple camera positions, and an ever-decreasing duration of shots to increase the tension. As offensive as the film is, there is no question that in it Griffith synthesized into a coherent, seamless narrative whole the formal elements of film: focal length, editing (for pace,

for effect), even intertitles (printed titles inserted into films—especially silent films—that speak for characters or to the narrative).

After all the controversy attending the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith responded not with an apology but with a second provocation, an ambitious four-part film called *Intolerance* (1916). Like *Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance* is didactic and sentimental. The rough cut ran for 8 hours. Griffith originally wanted to screen it in two parts on consecutive nights, but exhibitors balked, so he cut the film to 3 hours 20 minutes.

Intolerance moves back and forth among four story lines set in different historical periods: ancient Babylon, Judaea during the life of Jesus and at the time of his crucifixion, sixteenth-century France, and the present. Griffith proves equally adept with intimate scenes (with the star Lillian Gish in the film's modern sequence) and panoramic crowd scenes in the famed Babylonian sequence.



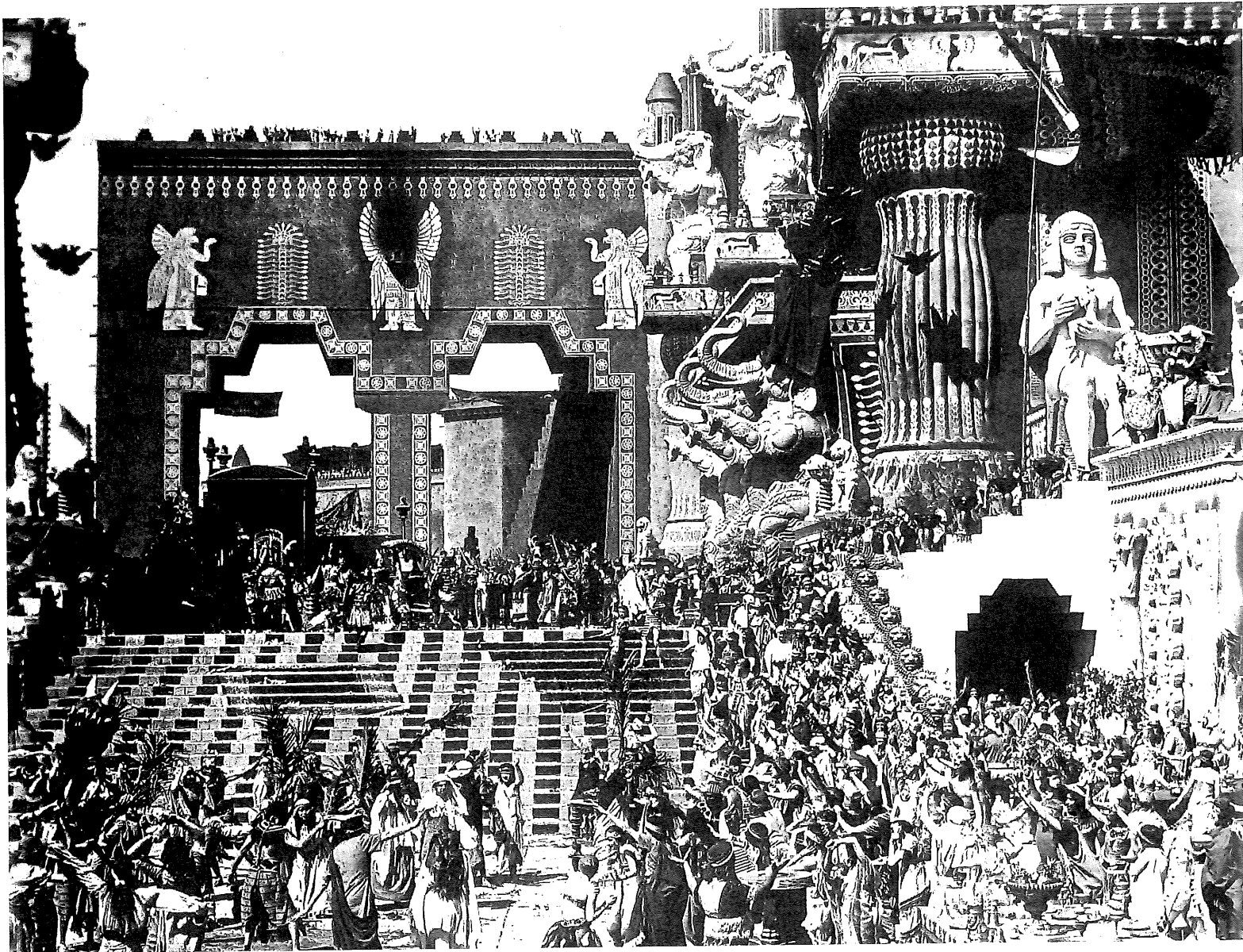
The Ku Klux Klan overtakes the Negro militia in *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915).

To appreciate *Intolerance* today, one must recognize the inventiveness of Griffith's aesthetic choices. For the Babylonian sequence, for example, the director erected life-size, detailed sets. Built in Hollywood, the Babylonian set was 1 mile wide, and some of its structures topped 300 feet. Even the extras donned opulent costumes. For the orgies, which shocked audiences with their scantily clad women in lewd poses, and the elaborate battles, Griffith had a cameraman shoot the scenes from a hot-air balloon. The effect, even today, is breathtaking.

Several scenes in *Intolerance* offer lessons in the editing of silent films. The modern story alone contains a number of examples: the strike sequence (composed of shots of steadily decreasing length cutting back and forth among strikers, their families, the armed militia called in to suppress the

strike, and the factory owner, who is depicted in a long shot as a tiny figure safely ensconced behind his desk in his cavernous office), the hangman's-test sequence (a medium close-up of the prison guards, a close-up of the strings on the hangman's noose that the executioners cut, a close-up of the man-size dummy weight falling through the trapdoor, and then a long establishing shot of the entire gallows apparatus as the dummy swings below the hangman's platform), and the action-edited, intercut montage sequence depicting a last-minute effort to save an innocent man from execution.

The last-minute rescue that ends the modern story was a staple of silent-film dramas and comedies. However much Griffith saw his work as different from or better than what other directors were doing, such melodramatic elements routinely punctuated his better films. One of Griffith's most



famous rescue sequences is in *Way Down East* (1920), the story of a country innocent named Anna (Lillian Gish) who ventures to the city to beg money from wealthy relatives, only to be tricked into a false marriage to Lennox Sanderson (Lowell Sherman). After having an illegitimate child by Sanderson and then losing the baby to a sudden illness, Anna finds momentary peace (and work) at a farm owned by the simple, God-fearing Bartlett family. The peace is short-lived, however, because through an improbable series of coincidences, Anna comes face-to-face once again with Sanderson. Forced to reveal to her hosts the truth about her sordid past, Anna confesses and then runs wildly out into the night, into a terrible winter storm, gets lost, and falls on the ice. The patch of ice on which she falls cracks free from the shore, sending Anna downriver toward Niagara Falls (and certain death). Fighting the blizzard, David Bartlett (Richard Barthelmess), the son of the farm owner who employs her, leaps across many ice floes and saves her. During the rescue, Anna gets soaked in the river and is ostensibly reborn: the Christian (baptismal) symbolism is hard to miss. She returns to the family farm as David's future wife, saved from the life of sin that inevitably (in silent melodrama, at least) accompanied her venture to the city. The scene is impressive enough as cinema, but even more impressive is the fact that both Barthelmess and Gish, like most other silent-film actors, did their own stunts. Adding to the suspense of the sequence and the drama of the last-minute rescue was the risk the actors themselves took in making the picture.

The plot of *Way Down East* is indicative of so much of the popular genre of silent Victorian melodrama. These films inevitably concern threats, usually of a sexual nature, to a young woman. The city (and the wealth it promises) is inevitably and unavoidably a trap, a place where a more modern culture lies in wait, poised to destroy the very fabric of Victorian morality. There is often a secret that must be kept at all costs—a secret that we know, after seeing a melodrama or two, will nonetheless be revealed. The private must be made



The last-minute rescue was a staple of silent-film melodrama. D. W. Griffith proved himself a master of this genre element in *Way Down East* (1920). Here Anna (Lillian Gish) floats helplessly toward Niagara Falls. At the very last minute she will be rescued by the film's hero, David Bartlett (Richard Barthelmess), who braves the ice floe to prove his love.

public in these films, and matters can be sorted out only after everyone tells and knows the truth.

Griffith made at least four significant silent features in addition to *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, and *Way Down East: Hearts of the World* (1918), *True Heart Susie* (1919), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1922). Historians seldom talk about Griffith's work after 1922, and there is little to say about Griffith after the advent of sound. In 1948 the director died in the Knickerbocker Hotel in Hollywood, a relic of a distant and glorious past.

Cecil B. DeMille

Cecil B. DeMille was the silent era's most consistently entertaining—and, in many ways, its most consistently successful—cineaste. He was a major figure in Hollywood from 1915, the year he made *The Cheat*, one of the great silent melodramas, to

(left) The Babylonian set built for D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) was 1 mile wide, and some of its structures topped 300 feet.

1956, when he directed perhaps his best-known sound film, *The Ten Commandments*. All told, DeMille directed over seventy features over a career that spanned five decades.

From the start, DeMille adhered to a simple principle: one should make movies that audiences want to see. As a consequence, critics and historians have written him off as a panderer to the lowbrow audiences that so adored his silent melodramas and his later overblown biblical epics. And that's too bad. His work, especially during the silent era, was frequently engaging, always stylistically interesting, and never pretentious or boring.

Of the silent features he directed between 1914 and 1927, DeMille showed off his talent best with steamy melodramas—films with titles like *The Cheat*, *The Woman God Forgot* (1917), *Old Wives for New* (1918), *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920), *The Affairs of Anatol* (1921), *Forbidden Fruit* (1921), and *Fool's Paradise* (1921). DeMille's stories revel in the temp-



The director Cecil B. DeMille, photographed in 1914, the year before he made *The Cheat*, one of the silent era's truly great melodramas.

tations of modern city culture. And although there is a moral of sorts at the end, one gets the sense that DeMille and his audience were much more interested in, and much more entertained by, the sin that precedes the film's moral than they'd have cared to admit.

DeMille cemented his reputation as an A-list director with *The Cheat*, a compact melodrama made at the end of a remarkably productive twelve-month period, during which he directed fourteen films. *The Cheat* tells the story of a young married woman, Edith (Fannie Ward), who can't wait to join the wealthy set. Social mobility is there for the taking, she thinks, so she doesn't see why she should wait for her husband, Richard (Jack Dean), to finish work on a big deal to get her what she wants. Her impatience proves to be her undoing. She indulges in a harebrained get-rich-quick scheme, in which she invests money intended for a Red Cross relief fund. When she loses the money, she turns to a financier, Haka Arakau (Sessue Hayakawa), who gets her out of the jam on one condition—that she pay him back with sex. The film hinges on this familiar melodramatic motif, as well as on DeMille's unapologetic exploitation of racist stereotypes. Arakau is depicted as a typical “yellow heavy” (as Asian villains were called at the time): he is covetous, inscrutable, and devious. He has lots of things, but what he wants most is what he can't have: a white woman.

We see Arakau and Edith together several times before they make their deal, and each time we are made to feel more and more uneasy. One key scene is an overhead shot of Edith exiting Arakau's car. He holds the door for her and then takes her hand. The film then cuts to the origin of the shot: Richard, looking down at the street from their apartment window, catches his wife cavorting with another man.

Later in the film, after Richard's financial deal succeeds, Edith makes one last visit to Arakau's house, to pay back the money he lent her. But he insists on being paid not in cash but in the manner they had agreed to. She struggles to protect her virtue but quickly gives in. To mark his victory—and to suggest sexual conquest—Arakau brands Edith on the shoulder with a Japanese symbol that the villain has used to mark his ownership of the antiques in his home. Now that she, too, bears his mark—an unmistakable symbol of sexual



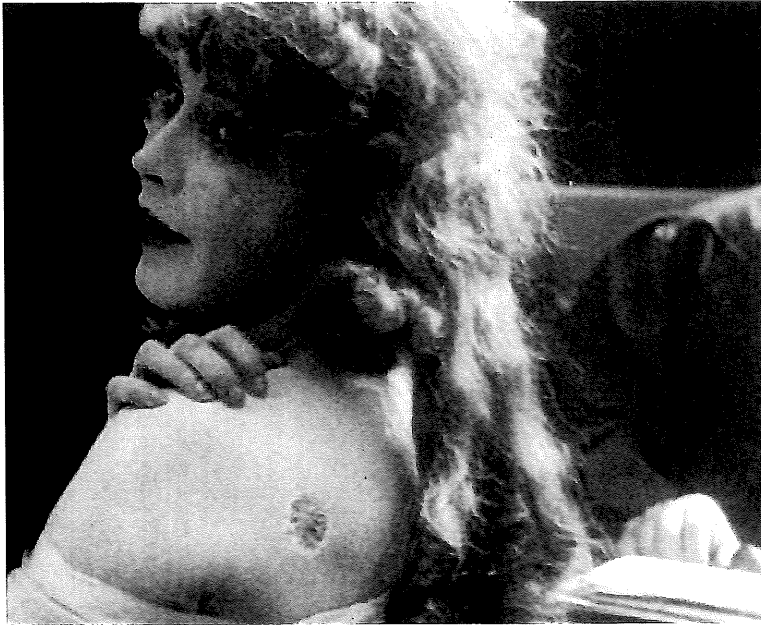
Edith (Fanny Ward) imagines the worst in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915): a headline in the next day's paper telling the world about her misguided attempt to use money from the Red Cross to make a bundle on the stock market. The film's villain, Haka Arakau (Sessue Hayakawa) reads her mind and seizes the opportunity, offering to cover the debt in exchange for sexual favors.

violation—Edith resists his claim to ownership, grabs his gun, and fires, hitting him in the arm.

Richard arrives to clean up the mess his wife has made and takes the blame for the shooting, ostensibly to protect her reputation. A courtroom drama ensues, and just as Richard is about to be found guilty, Edith takes the stand. She boldly pulls down the strap of her dress—an outrageous gesture in America circa 1915—and shows the judge, jury, and gallery the brand on her shoulder. She points her finger at Arakau, and we see an intertitle: “This is my defense!” The judge summarily dismisses all the charges against Richard, and the gallery, composed of white men and women, takes over from there: in the riot they foment,

Arakau is swallowed up, his precise fate uncertain, though lynching seems the most likely outcome. Richard and Edith exit the courtroom looking like a just-married couple walking back down the aisle of a church. To DeMille's credit, Edith's and Richard's expressions are hard to read. What we see is not elation or even relief. Instead, we see a profound uncertainty; after all that Edith has done and all that has been done to her, Richard is not sure which is worse, jail or his newfound notoriety as the cuckolded husband.

Like Griffith's *Way Down East*, DeMille's *The Cheat* pivots on a guilty secret (actually two guilty secrets: Edith's deal with Arakau and Richard's false confession). Both films move headlong



Edith (Fannie Ward) bares her shoulder in the courtroom to reveal Arakau's brand. A title card declares, "I shot Arakau and this is my defense." The entire courtroom then turns on the villain as the married couple exit arm in arm in Cecil B. DeMille's melodrama *The Cheat* (1915).

toward the inevitable revelation, the private made public. And both films are about women waiting for the right man to come along or come around. There's a distinct fascination in these melodramas with women's sexuality, which is presented as perpetually at risk. Propriety in the form of behavior appropriate to young women is also at issue. In *Way Down East*, Griffith reasserted propriety by returning Anna to the simple life in the country, where, after some trials and tribulations, she finds redemption. DeMille refused to tie things up so neatly. He leaves us questioning the future of all the principal characters. At the core of both plotlines, however, is the dynamic opposition of city and country, though DeMille complicates it by situating Arakau on rural Long Island while Richard toils admirably—working for a living—in Manhattan. A second dynamic opposition is added in *The Cheat*: white versus nonwhite. Arakau is recognized as a threat the first time we see him because he is Asian, dark, different.

Silent film depended on stereotypes as a visual shorthand. But that hardly excuses the trenchant racism that exists in so many silent films. To say that the times were such that unflattering stereo-

types were taken for granted is a weak excuse as well. Although such stereotypes and stock characters were widely accepted, there were often protests in response to those portrayals. Following *The Cheat*'s first run, in 1915, the Japanese embassy to the United States issued a formal complaint, and in response the Asian villain's name was changed from Tori (an identifiably Japanese name that was given to the character in the original version of the film) to Arakau (the name used in virtually all available prints of the film), thus transforming him into a native of Burma (present-day Myanmar, a country, we can assume, whose consulate in the United States was less powerful than Japan's).

Although *The Cheat* captures our attention with its clever narrative, DeMille made the most of a decidedly theatrical style. He strategically staged key scenes in front of and behind shoji screens in order to represent clandestine conversations by chance overheard (which is how, for example,



The director Erich von Stroheim in character and in costume as Count Wladislaw Sergius Karamzin in a 1922 publicity photograph for his film *Foolish Wives*.



The wedding-banquet scene in Erich von Stroheim's naturalist melodrama *Greed* (1924). Despite the seeming civility and formality, the family tears the flesh from large carcasses. The inevitable descent of basically decent people to behavior governed by base urges is a major theme of the film.

Arakau first learns of Edith's predicament) and to present important confrontations in silhouette. His expressive use of Rembrandt lighting, focusing a very "hot" (powerful) key (front) light on a subject's face while the rest of the frame is dark, became something of a signature style in the silent era. The effect is at once flattering and mysterious.

DeMille was a set-piece director, which is to say that he designed elaborate stage sets and allowed the drama to unravel within the carefully dressed and lit space. He began his movie career as an actor, and he pushed silent-film acting away from the theatrical toward a more realistic style. Whereas his films have an epic or operatic scale and scope, it is clear that his characters are always just people having to find their way out of a world that is full of temptation and confusion. In many ways, DeMille was Griffith's more modern counterpart—no less a film artist in the final analysis, and one with a more modern sensibility.

Erich von Stroheim

The first thing audiences saw when the projectionist unspooled Erich von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* (1919) and *The Devil's Pass Key* (1920) was an affirmation of authorship: respectively, "personally directed by Erich von Stroheim" and "in its entirety an Erich von Stroheim creation." Like the movie stars whose celebrity he so coveted, von Stroheim was his own best publicist. And like a lot of early movie stars, von Stroheim, by the time he arrived in Hollywood, was armed with a fabricated backstory, which cast him as an aristocrat in exile, the last in a line of Austrian nobility, a part he played to perfection. Von Stroheim was in reality just Stroheim—the *von* was yet another pretense. Like the executives he worked for (and perhaps fooled), he was just a Jewish boy from the old country, descended from generations of working-class folk.

Von Stroheim may have been a phony, but as a filmmaker he eschewed artifice. Evident from the start of his career was an idiosyncratic style focused on visual detail, a cinematic realism that was new to fiction filmmaking. Foremost among the themes of von Stroheim's early features was a divine decadence: debauched life studied closely (for all its affectations and false fronts) by a camera that refused to shy away from anything. Later in his career, von Stroheim would turn his camera on the wretched lives of the poor and the unlucky, and he would do so with a similar attention to detail and commitment to showing life as it really was.

Such a commitment to an absolute realism required a painstaking production process, one

that often caused his films to fall behind schedule and go over budget. Since his celebrity depended on an appearance of autonomy, he tended to overplay the part of the fiercely independent director and so frequently clashed with studio executives. A legendary confrontation between von Stroheim and Irving Thalberg occurred in the early 1920s, shortly after Thalberg became the production chief at Universal and von Stroheim had completed work on his third feature, *Foolish Wives* (1922). During the early stages of the production of *Merry-Go-Round*, Thalberg sent a message to von Stroheim, who was on location with his production staff. Seeing no reason to interrupt production to talk to a studio executive, von Stroheim ignored the message. In response to the slight, Thalberg



In the final moments of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), McTeague (Gibson Gowland, left) murders Marcus (Jean Hersholt). But the crime hardly frees him. In what seems like a sick joke, McTeague soon collapses from the desert heat while dragging Marcus (to whom he is handcuffed) out of Death Valley. True to the film's larger vision of humanity's struggle to survive, both men die, neither getting what he wanted.

halted production on the project. Von Stroheim turned to Laemmle in the New York office, assuming Laemmle would set Thalberg straight. But to the director's surprise, Universal's founder deferred to Thalberg. When von Stroheim persisted in opposition to Thalberg's directives, he was summarily fired and replaced by the studio stalwart Rupert Julian, the director of some sixty shorts and features between 1914 and 1930.

Merry-Go-Round proved to be an object lesson in the emerging business of moviemaking in America. Thalberg's decision to fire von Stroheim made clear that in the studio system, directors were hired to do a job, and when they didn't do that job (according to criteria set by their employers and managers), they could (and would) be replaced. *Merry-Go-Round*, released in 1923, was a huge box-office success, and von Stroheim's name did not appear anywhere on-screen. For everyone who was familiar with the making of *Merry-Go-Round*, it was clear that Thalberg's business model had won over von Stroheim's creative ideal.

After von Stroheim lost face in his confrontation with Thalberg, he left Universal and signed with Goldwyn Pictures, where he began work on *Greed*, an epic adaptation of Frank Norris's novel *McTeague*. But although his productions at Universal had routinely gone overbudget and run long, nothing prepared von Stroheim's new studio for the rough cut of *Greed*, which weighed in at forty-two reels, with a running time of about 9 hours. Clearly something had to be done to cut or at least break up the film (into separate parts for separate screenings). It was indeed bad luck for the director that negotiating a final cut of the film fell to Thalberg, his nemesis at Universal: *Greed* had taken so long to produce that the rough cut became the property of the newly formed Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, a conglomerate managed by Thalberg.

Faced with an absurdly long film that was in his eyes unreleasable, Thalberg had studio editors cut all but the film's central narrative, concerning a couple, McTeague and Trina (Gibson Gowland and ZaSu Pitts), whose lives are changed dramatically, and for the worse, when she wins a lottery. The release print of von Stroheim's 9-hour film is just over 2 hours.

After the cuts were made, von Stroheim disowned *Greed*. Though the public never saw anything close to the ambitious film von Stroheim had

made, what they did see was an unstinting and uncompromisingly realistic work of cinema, a profoundly faithful adaptation of Norris's obsessive naturalism. Like Norris, von Stroheim put on display unadulterated reality—the human condition in all its sinful squalor. Character motivations in *Greed* are simple; in the end everyone is out for himself or herself. McTeague and Trina marry only after McTeague has taken advantage of her sexually in his dentist's chair. He marries her out of guilt and regrets the arrangement from the start. Their marriage begins with a bizarre and ominous wedding banquet, during which Trina's family devours food by tearing the meat from oversize carcasses. (The sense of foreboding is unmistakable.) After Trina wins the lottery, she falls out of love with McTeague and hopelessly in love with her money. At a butcher's shop, Trina buys rancid bones to save money. And in a memorable scene she lets down her hair and undulates on her bed with a bagful of gold coins.

To achieve his vision of realism, von Stroheim composed *Greed* in depth and with very little camera movement; we're allowed to linger in a scene, with time to take in foreground and background, action, gesture, and detail. Von Stroheim paid careful attention to the dressing of his sets: no item is too small, no artifact too insignificant. The realist effect begins and ends with the actors, who were routinely subjected to von Stroheim's naturalist vision. On the set, von Stroheim played the role of the autocratic Prussian perfectionist, and his insistence on shooting multiple takes wore his actors down to the point where they felt much like the unlucky characters they were playing. This effect was particularly evident in the film's final scene, shot in Death Valley, California. McTeague and Marcus (Jean Hersholt), McTeague's rival for Trina's affections (and her money), face off in the desert. They are there to settle an old score, but instead both die of exhaustion, handcuffed together. The actors themselves were as exhausted as the characters they played. The location von Stroheim chose was so remote that it took a full day to reach by car. And in temperatures exceeding 100 degrees, the actors lived the roles they played, wilting under the magisterial power of Mother Nature. Legend has it that Hersholt lost over 25 pounds on the desert shoot and was hospitalized after the production wrapped. One can

guess that von Stroheim viewed Hersholt's suffering as further proof of the value of his naturalist vision.

Greed did poorly at the box office, and that was pretty much it for von Stroheim as a movie director. His only important later work was *Queen Kelly* (1929), which, like *Greed*, was never released in a version he could bear. In what may be a fitting legacy, von Stroheim is today more famous than the films he made. He was the first celebrity director to be undermined and ultimately devoured by "the system," and as such he has become the model for the wronged director, the first in a long, illustrious line including, most famously, Orson Welles and Francis Ford Coppola.

Thomas H. Ince

Thomas H. Ince first worked briefly as a director for Biograph in New York and then for Carl Laemmle's Independent Motion Picture Company (IMP), where, stationed in Cuba, he shot several films featuring Mary Pickford. Then, in 1911, Ince moved to California, where he leased an 18,000-acre ranch in what is now Santa Monica and built his own dream studio. He dubbed the site Inceville.



The silent-film producer Thomas Ince, photographed in the 1920s.

Ince believed that for a studio trademark to mean something, the studio chief had to make sure that every movie produced by the studio followed certain basic guidelines. Although a number of talented directors worked at Inceville—Francis Ford, Frank Borzage, William Desmond Taylor, Fred Niblo, and Henry King—Ince believed in hands-on studio supervision. He outlined the action of every film and then handed the outline to the director with a stamped-on order that read, "Produce this exactly as written." When the shoot was complete, the director was sent to another project while Ince supervised proceedings in the editing room.

Ince was among the first in Hollywood to recognize that assembly-line production methods in other industries might be adopted by the film industry. Though he supervised every stage of film production, employees were organized into separate departments (writing, scenery, makeup, and so on). Like autoworkers, these specialists did the same basic task on every production. Like Henry Ford's automobiles, films that bore Ince's name came with an assurance of uniform quality; his logo became a sign of authorship and ownership.

In 1912, Ince purchased the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Circus, a Wild West outfit that employed real cowboys and Indians and maintained "improvements," such as covered wagons, tepees, a buffalo herd, assorted western gear, and an arsenal of authentic guns. Taking full advantage of his acquisition, Ince became the premier producer of movie westerns. In 1913 alone Ince produced over 150 films, most of them westerns. In 1914 he hired the cowboy turned actor William S. Hart, who with Ince's help became a major star. Hart was a credible cowboy at a time when there were still plenty of cowboys roaming the range that lay just east of the emerging motion-picture colony.

Unlike Broncho Billy Anderson and Tom Mix, the era's other cowboy stars, Hart was not averse to playing a bad guy. His best films for Ince—*The Bad Buck of Santa Ynez* (1914) and *The Return of Draw Egan* (1916)—are like a lot of other early westerns—*The Virginian* (DeMille, 1914), *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923), and *The Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1924)—at once nostalgic and sentimental. They are essentially melodramas made for men.

In 1915, Ince signed a deal with D. W. Griffith to join the Triangle Film Corporation. At Triangle,

Ince directed and produced his best film, the anti-war picture *Civilization* (Reginald Barker and Ince, 1916). Although in his time he was considered as important a film pioneer as Griffith, his legacy as a filmmaker has not fared well, in part because westerns have been widely viewed as second-tier projects and in part because he was an unfortunate player in a strange murder scandal involving the comedy legend Charlie Chaplin, the actress Marion Davies, the soon-to-be-famous gossip columnist Louella Parsons, and the millionaire media mogul William Randolph Hearst. The story, assembled over the years through hearsay and circumstantial evidence, goes something like this: Hearst, in November 1924, invited Ince and several other Hollywood celebrities to take a pleasure cruise aboard his yacht. Because his career was on the decline, Ince had hoped to interest Hearst in investing in his films. In the meantime, Hearst was more interested in finding out whether his girlfriend, Davies, was having an affair with Chaplin, a notorious womanizer. In a disastrous case of mistaken identity, Hearst stumbled on Ince and Davies talking. Thinking his girlfriend was having a tête-à-tête with Chaplin, he shot the producer in the head. An alternative version has Hearst shooting at Chaplin, missing, and hitting Ince instead. Yet another version implicates Hearst only in the cover-up. That version has Ince shot by Davies's secretary, Abigail Kinsolving, who, rumor has it, had been raped by Ince earlier in the cruise. Whatever happened, Hearst cut the pleasure cruise short, and Ince, dying, was surreptitiously gotten off the boat. The official story of Ince's death—the version printed in Hearst newspapers—was that Ince died of heart failure following a severe flare-up of stomach ulcers. Neither Davies nor Chaplin, both alleged to have witnessed the shooting, ever talked about the event. Parsons, who was little more than a staff reporter in the Hearst empire, was soon given a lifetime contract to work the gossip beat in Los Angeles for the Hearst newspaper syndicate.

F. W. Murnau

F. W. (Friedrich Wilhelm) Murnau was an internationally respected director when he arrived in Hollywood in 1927. And his first American film, *Sunrise* (1927), a melodrama that fit the familiar and popular genre pattern, evinced a signature



The movie-star cowboy William S. Hart as the outlaw Bowie Blake in *The Devil's Double* (directed by Hart and produced by Thomas Ince).

mise-en-scène, an expressionist style (low contrast, shadowy key lighting, compositions in depth, and long takes) that had characterized his internationally celebrated German films: *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Last Laugh* (1924), *Tartuffe* and *Faust* (both 1926).

Sunrise, the winner of an Oscar for Best Picture, Unique and Artistic Production at the first Academy Awards ceremony, tells the story of a country farmer (George O'Brien) whose peaceful life with his amiable blond wife (Janet Gaynor) and baby is disrupted by the arrival of a dark, seductive woman from the city (Margaret Livingston). The film depicts the city woman as an interloper who cares little about what the locals think of her relationship with the farmer and does little to conceal her plans to leave the country backwater he calls home with the farmer and his cash. She is listed in the credits as the Woman from the City, as if that information alone is all one needs to understand her.

The farmer is depicted as physically rugged but emotionally and spiritually weak. He is clearly overmatched by the woman's cunning, and he is unable to resist the promise of clandestine (and,



The Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston) imploring the Man (George O'Brien) to leave his wife in F. W. Murnau's melodrama *Sunrise* (1927).

by implication) intense and exciting extramarital encounters. The Woman from the City seems to live by night, a vampire of sorts lurking in the shadows. In one scene we see her perched atop a tree in the dark, watching the farmer like a wild animal sizing up its prey. The city woman eventually persuades the farmer to drown his wife and run away to the city with her. As the farmer and his wife go by boat from the island where their community is located to the mainland city, he reaches for her throat, but he cannot go through with the crime and pulls away in shame. When the boat reaches the outskirts of the city, the wife flees her husband, heartbroken. He gives chase and overtakes her, and after an initial hesitation they reconcile and spend a day rediscovering and rekindling their love. At the end of the film, the family's happy reunion is punctuated by the city woman's return to the city alone.

Throughout *Sunrise*, Murnau uses *mise-en-scène* to depict the inner state of the characters. The wife is depicted initially in soft white light, the

husband is in shadow, and the city woman is sleekly key lit in an otherwise dark frame, as if adrift in a moral void. The film embraces familiar genre characteristics, especially the dynamic opposition between the city and the country, here rendered with an equanimity seldom seen in American melodramas. As they rekindle their love, the husband and wife discover the delights of the city: glamour, automation, and consumerism. The city scenes have a kaleidoscopic quality and are lit with far less contrast than the somber country scenes. Unlike the vision of so many other directors of melodramas, Murnau's vision of the city is not one sided: it isn't simply a bad place in which modernity and progress overrun virtue.

Though his German films were so much of their time and place, Murnau seemed to master the Hollywood melodrama instantly, as is evident in *Sunrise* as well as his two subsequent features: *Four Devils* (1928) and *City Girl* (1930). For his fourth (and what would prove to be his last) film, Murnau departed from the successful formula with *Tabu* (1931), a South Sea Island picture begun auspiciously with the famous documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty. The film was released within months of Murnau's tragic death in a car accident, rumored to be the result of his dabbling with some ancient cursed stones on the island paradise. *Tabu* displays the peculiar genius of both directors: Flaherty's penchant for rendering heroic the day-to-day struggles of his subjects is complemented by Murnau's romantic vision. Exactly what each director did during the production is unclear, but the final shot, in which two doomed lovers drift apart in open waters, is pure Murnau. The closing image of *Tabu*—Murnau's last testament on film—is an apt display of the singular importance of *mise-en-scène* in his work.

Though European directors enjoyed greater artistic freedom in their own countries, the lure of Hollywood money, worldwide distribution, and top-notch production crews proved hard to resist for such filmmakers as Murnau, Mauritz Stiller, and Josef von Sternberg. Stiller was hired by MGM in 1925 as part of a package deal that included the captivating Swedish actress Greta Garbo. Stiller may have been the talent MGM was paying for, but Garbo was the one who paid off. The "team" of Stiller and Garbo brought with it the promise of sexier, more stylish, more European films. But

Stiller could not abide the Hollywood studio system and ran into problems with his very first film, *The Temptress* (1926), a highly stylized femme fatale melodrama starring Garbo in the title role. Frustrated by Stiller's inability to stick to the studio's production schedule, MGM executives Irving Thalberg and Louis B. Mayer dumped Stiller and hired the ever-dependable studio director Fred Niblo to complete the film.

Stiller lasted less than two years in Hollywood. His final American assignment (and, as things played out, his final film) was *The Street of Sin* (1928), a melodrama starring Emil Jannings and Fay Wray, who would become famous five years later as Ann Darrow in *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933). Stiller

was pulled off the picture after running afoul of Thalberg and Mayer once again. In 1928 he returned to Europe and died later that year, at the age of forty-five.

The Street of Sin was completed by Josef von Sternberg (even though he received no screen credit for his work on the picture), another director whose Hollywood career was linked to a European-born movie star (Marlene Dietrich). But von Sternberg had slightly better luck than Stiller, at least at first. After taking over *The Street of Sin* in Stiller's stead, he teamed with that film's star, Emil Jannings, to make *The Last Command* (1928) and then the legendary German melodrama about a teacher seduced and shamed, *Der Blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930, released with an English sound track



The city scenes in F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) have a kaleidoscopic quality, creating the perfect setting in which the country couple (George O'Brien and Janet Gaynor) rediscover each other.



Mauritz Stiller (left) directing Greta Garbo on the set of the 1926 melodrama *The Temptress*.

by Paramount that same year). Although the director's later career was tied to Dietrich, he was already an accomplished filmmaker by the time he met her, having directed two gangster pictures, *Underworld* (1927) and *The Docks of New York* (1928), that helped establish the gritty realist style that influenced the gangster films of the early sound era (discussed in Chapter 3).

Studio Filmmaking

Between 1917 and 1928 the studios released approximately 600 films per year, including an industry record of 841 films in 1918. Only a few of those films were made by directors with any name recognition, and fewer still were made by directors whose names remain familiar to us today. The vast majority of the films in general release were made by so-called studio directors, men and women who labored in relative anonymity, often tied to a particular genre or movie star at their respective studios.

Fay Wray and Emil Jannings share a moment in the 1928 melodrama *The Street of Sin*. The director Mauritz Stiller was pulled off the film and replaced by Josef von Sternberg. *The Street of Sin* proved to be Stiller's last film; he died later in 1928 in Sweden, his adopted homeland, at the age of forty-five.

Being a good studio director meant being anonymous, sacrificing one's ego for the greater good of a movie's potential at the box office. Take, for example Allan Dwan. Though his career spanned fifty years and he is credited as the director of almost four hundred films, he is known today to only the savviest of historians of cinema. Dwan was an electrical engineer by training and did his first work in the film business as a lighting technician. In 1911 he began directing short films for a variety of studios, finally coming to the attention of Griffith when he was hiring directors to work for the Triangle–Fine Arts Studio. At Triangle, Dwan's technical expertise came in handy: a perambulating camera tower he designed was used to great effect in the Babylonian section of Griffith's epic *Intolerance*.

Dwan's first big feature was *Robin Hood* (1922), starring Douglas Fairbanks. The director and star teamed up again in 1929 with *The Iron Mask*. Sandwiched between those action films were three melodramas featuring the studio's temperamental star Gloria Swanson: *Zaza* (1923), *Manhandled* (1924), and *Stage Struck* (1925). In the 1930s, Dwan paid the bills by directing Shirley Temple pictures: *Heidi* (1937) and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1938). A decade later he directed a very





Greta Garbo and her frequent co-star, John Gilbert, in the MGM melodrama *Flesh and the Devil* (Clarence Brown, 1926). When Mauritz Stiller didn't work out at the studio, Brown became Garbo's director of choice, helming seven of her features between 1926 and 1937.

different sort of film star, John Wayne, in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), a performance that earned the actor his first Oscar nomination. In every project he undertook, Dwan understood his role in the collaborative filmmaking process, and to put it bluntly, he knew his place in the celebrity culture that lies at the foundation of Hollywood.

Marshall Neilan, another important but now-obscure filmmaker, directed Mary Pickford in her signature melodrama *Stella Maris* (1918) and his wife, the star Blanche Sweet, in an early adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1924). Despite his anonymity outside Hollywood, Neilan epitomized the Jazz Age artiste. He dropped out of school at age eleven, had a brief run as a movie star, and went on to make over one hundred films, most of them during the silent era. Perhaps because his films and the stars who appeared in them were better known than he was, Neilan occasionally bristled at the inequity. He once famously quipped about his employer, "An empty taxi cab drove up, and Louis B. Mayer got out," a remark

that characterized his frustration at having to answer to the former junk dealer.

Rex Ingram (who directed Valentino in his first major role, the 1921 silent epic *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*), James Cruze (a one-time snake-oil salesman in a traveling show who became one of the highest-paid directors in the silent era), and Roland West (who specialized in horror pictures, including the 1925 Lon Chaney film *The Monster*) were all productive studio directors in the silent era. Ingram directed twenty-nine films, Cruze helmed seventy-five, and West (whose career ended suddenly after his live-in girlfriend, the movie star Thelma Todd, was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning in their garage) is credited with fourteen.

The internal politics of a 1920s Hollywood studio could be brutal, and sometimes the misfortune of one director proved to be the good fortune of another waiting for his or her turn behind the camera. For example, Mauritz Stiller's problems helped make the careers of two other studio

directors, Clarence Brown and Fred Niblo at MGM. After Stiller left Hollywood, Brown became Garbo's director of choice, directing her in seven features, including *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), *Anna Christie* (1930), and *Anna Karenina* (1935). The reclusive, enigmatic Garbo trusted Brown, and that was enough for the MGM brass. Though he is little known and little regarded today, Brown retired with fifty-three features to his credit and five Oscar nominations for Directing.

By the time Niblo was assigned to take over for Stiller on *The Temptress* in 1926, he was an established studio director with a reputation for quality work in several genres. He ably produced vamp melodramas like *Sex* (1920) and racy comedies like *Silk Hosiery* (1920), but his bread and butter was the action-adventure picture: *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), *The Three Musketeers* (1921), and *Ben-Hur* (1925). Like most other studio directors, Niblo was adaptable and versatile, and he understood that the stars he directed—Garbo, Fairbanks, and Valentino—were the reason to see his films.

Studio directors made movies that fit neatly into the studios' "house style" and properly showcased the studios' prime assets—their movie stars. They were willing to sacrifice ego for a steady gig, celebrity for a steady paycheck, and in so doing they produced the vast majority of films in the silent era, many of which were the films that mattered most to American audiences.

Women behind the Scenes

Women were routinely typecast on-screen, and much the same can be said for their work in the industry infrastructure. The men who ran the business had pretty firm ideas about what constituted "women's work": costume design, hairdressing, makeup, and set decoration. Editing and screenwriting were tasks open to women as well, the latter occupation in part because the studios were actively courting a female audience. Among the most influential screenwriters of the era were June Mathis, Frances Marion, and Jeanie Macpherson.

Mathis began her show-business career as an actress, playing mostly ingenue roles in traveling stage productions. When films took over the live-show market, Mathis tried her hand at writing, and her work came to the attention of Metro president Richard Rowland. She quickly earned a certain



From left to right: The actor Thomas Meighan, the screen heartthrob Rudolph Valentino and the screenwriter June Mathis. This photograph was taken in 1922, right after Mathis and Meighan posted bail for Valentino, Mathis's longtime friend, who was briefly jailed on charges of bigamy.

celebrity and by extension some power over production work on the lot. Her best-known film was *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, an exotic, romantic melodrama, a genre that would become her métier. Yet Mathis's clout at Metro extended beyond her script work. After writing *The Four Horsemen*, she handpicked Rex Ingram to direct the picture and, legend has it, insisted that Rudolph Valentino be signed to star in it. (Valentino and Mathis were close friends. Valentino, upon his death, was interred in the Mathis family's vault. A year later Mathis died, also suddenly, and joined him there.)

After another successful film with Ingram and Valentino, *The Conquering Power* (1921), Mathis held executive positions at Goldwyn Pictures (where she worked with King Vidor, Neilan, and von Stroheim), the newly merged Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and finally First National, where she helped produce films for the stars Colleen Moore and Corinne Griffith. Mathis proved to be a unique figure in an industry that seldom veers from tradition. She was a screenwriter who gained power and control over the films made from her work, and she was a woman who, in the male-dominated profession of moviemaking, became an executive with considerable influence over high-profile films.

Frances Marion, another important female screenwriter in the silent era, wrote scripts for Mary Pickford, the most powerful female star in

the industry in the early 1920s. It was Marion who helped create Pickford's Little Mary on-screen persona—at once sweet, pretty, confident, and capable, a version of the so-called new woman that proved extremely popular. After her success with Pickford, Marion wrote scripts for popular films featuring a number of female stars: for Marion Davies, *The Restless Sex* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1920); for Lillian Gish, *The Scarlet Letter* (Victor Sjöström, 1926); for Greta Garbo, *Anna Christie* (Brown, 1930); and for Marie Dressler, *Emma* (Brown, 1932).

All told, Marion wrote 325 scripts, over 150 of which were produced and released. She served as vice president of the Screen Writers Guild, the only woman of her generation to hold an executive office in the union. In 1930 and 1932, Marion won Academy Awards for the script of *The Big House* (George W. Hill, 1930) and the original story of *The Champ* (Vidor, 1931). She was still young and at the top of her game when her career stalled: Irving Thalberg's death left her without an advocate at MGM and on the wrong side of bitter infighting.

Though she broke into the industry as an actress and appeared in nearly 140 films, many with the industry's top stars, including Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford, Jeanie Macpherson is now best known for her screenplays (and for a much rumored romantic relationship with Cecil B. DeMille). Regardless of what may have occurred between Macpherson and DeMille romantically, a significant creative collaboration certainly took place. Between 1914 and 1930, Macpherson wrote some of DeMille's best and sexiest melodramas—*The Cheat* (1915), *The Woman God Forgot* (1917), and *The Affairs of Anatol* (1921)—and his most opulent biblical spectacles—*The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The King of Kings* (1927).

Among the cadre of women writing scripts at the studios in the 1920s, most notable are Ouida Bergère, who adapted Booth Tarkington's play *The Man from Home* (George Fitzmaurice, 1922); Olga Printzlau, who wrote the first adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* (Wesley Ruggles, 1924); Margaret Turnbull, who wrote the scenario that turned Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* into a film (Frank Reicher, 1916); Clara Beranger, who did the same for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (John S. Robertson, 1920); Jane Murfin, who adapted Jack London's *White Fang* (Laurence Trimble, 1925); Beulah Marie Dix, sce-

narist of *The Squaw Man* (DeMille, 1918); Marion Fairfax, who adapted Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (Harry O. Hoyt, 1925); Eve Unsell, who wrote an adaptation of the stage play *Three Men and a Girl* (Neilan, 1919); and Sada Cowan, who adapted the novel *The New Commandment* (Howard Higgin, 1925). These women were mostly college educated, and many boasted a background in other (more traditional) forms of writing. Though screenwriters did not earn the sort of money that movie stars routinely made for their participation in the production of motion pictures, they nonetheless made more than most other women in other occupations and more than most other writers, male or female, writing books or articles for newspapers and magazines. Unlike the screenwriters of today, who are seldom mentioned in the critical literature and popular reviews, the screenwriters of the 1920s were viewed with high regard by critics and film historians, who believed that they brought, by their mere presence if not their actual work, a semblance of high art and high literature to a medium sorely in need of such uplift. That women provided that uplift, that literary underpinning, is a point too seldom acknowledged.



The screenwriter Frances Marion and her fellow writer James Hilton in a publicity photograph taken in the 1930s.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF FILM COMEDY

Comedy shorts played an important role in the silent-film program, in part because comedy acts had long been central to vaudeville, whose variety-show format so influenced early exhibition practices. Though comedy skits were just one of the many acts on a typical vaudeville program, which might also include singers, jugglers, acrobats, and animal acts, several comedians emerged as vaudeville's first true headliners. The same proved true in the early years of American cinema as comedy quickly became a key attraction and a select group of comedians became influential movie stars.

The three transcendent silent-film comedy stars were Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. Each was distinct in style and approach, but all three were knockabouts, willing to risk health and well-being for the sake of a gag. All three were also veterans of or deeply influenced by vaudeville comedy, and their success made clear the new medium's tie to the popular entertainment it would soon supplant.

It is widely believed that the period from 1915 to 1928 was a golden age for film comedy. Such a contention is based not on the sophistication of the material but on the sheer exuberance of the performances and the importance of comedy to popular film at that point. The vast majority of silent-film comedies were decidedly lowbrow. No amount of athleticism or artistry—and there's no doubt that Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd brought considerable athletic ability and artistry to the screen—can change the fact that those artists' films were composed almost exclusively of gags and that those gags fell within a limited range of possibilities generally involving a physical calamity, like a crash or a fall. What Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd accomplished was to make the most of a limited set of options: they brought an amazing ingenuity to what was at bottom a simple form.

That said, we should not underrate their films' larger social significance. In a world that was guided by a repressive Victorian morality, the violence, the speed, and the complex mechanics of physical comedy offered a challenge to a system that found little variety or humor in the everyday. The social transcendence briefly achieved by the comedy star in this era represented a move to a more modern (a faster and wilder) America. The

characters played by Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd ushered in this new America with a bemused innocence; like many moviegoers, they were just little guys trying to make the most out of life, moving from one calamity to the next, bouncing back when the world kicked them, trying to find humor in a life that was seldom funny.

Charlie Chaplin

In 1913, Charlie (Charles Spencer) Chaplin left Karno, a British-based traveling variety show, to become an ensemble player at Mack Sennett's Keystone studio. Though the slapstick style of the English stage and the utter chaos of Sennett's crude cine-knockabouts were quite different affairs, Chaplin made the transition from vaudeville stage to moving pictures look easy. During his first year at Keystone, he appeared in thirty-five films and quickly became a key company player, along with Fatty Arbuckle, Chester Conklin, Marie Dressler, Mabel Normand, Slim Summerville, and Mack Swain.

Chaplin debuted what would become his signature Little Tramp character in a Sennett short, *Kid Auto Races in Venice* (1914). Donning oversized pants and big shoes, he clowns his way through a soapbox derby. The Tramp was a sentimental construct: poor but happy, shabby and homely but



From left to right: Phyllis Allen, Mabel Normand, Mack Swain, and Charlie Chaplin, ensemble players in the 1914 Keystone comedy *Getting Acquainted* (directed by Chaplin and produced by Mack Sennett).



In Charlie Chaplin's *Easy Street* (1917) the recently deputized Little Tramp (Chaplin) uses a gas lamp to subdue the neighborhood bully (Eric Campbell).

beautiful inside. He had a signature walk, a toed-out waddle that had much in common with the pantomime style of the circus clown. But unlike the circus clown, whose clumsiness becomes the butt of every joke (falling off a bike, smashing into a wall, getting doused with a pail of water), the Tramp's waddle masks a dancer's grace. What is funny about the Tramp is that in the end he is not what he seems to be: even (or especially) in moments of inebriation, infatuation, or desperation, he is capable of feats of surprising grace and skill. His fellow comic actor W. C. Fields famously described Chaplin as not a comedian but "the greatest goddamn ballet dancer," a remark that speaks to the grace with which Chaplin performed his slapstick stunts and gags.

Like many other silent-film stars, Chaplin followed the money and the promise of greater artistic freedom from studio to studio (he was at Keystone until 1915, at Essanay from 1915 to 1916, at Mutual from 1916 to 1917, at First National from 1918 to 1922, and at United Artists from 1923 to 1952). At Keystone he earned \$150 a week; Essanay paid him \$1,250 a week. The move to Mutual came with guarantees totaling almost \$700,000 annually. When he was not yet thirty years old, First National signed him to a fixed-term contract exceeding \$1 million a year. In order to justify such a lofty salary and to maintain the sort of celebrity to which he had grown accustomed, as early as 1918 Chaplin had begun thinking about making feature films. But how he would get from



the 16- to 30-minute short subject—an ideal length for a gag-based comedy—to feature-length narrative comedy was a question he could not easily or quickly answer.

At Essanay, Chaplin serially refined his signature character and moved away from pure physical comedy to work that offered a social or political edge. In one of his best Essanay films, *The Bank* (1915), he explored what would become an important and consistent theme in his films, the absurdity and futility of hard work. The film casts the Little Tramp as a working stiff, a bank janitor who has a thing for the bank manager's secretary. It is an impossible romance—she is clearly out of his league—but he dreams about a life with her anyway. The film gets interesting when a band of thugs enters the bank. Implausibly, the tramp janitor subdues the thieves, and the secretary lands in his arms—but there is a catch. The comic kick-in-the-pants ending reminds us that such dreams of transcendence are just—well, dreams. The film ends as the Little Tramp wakes to find himself cuddling with his mop—and not, as in his dream, the secretary.

A similar social-satirical bent is evident in the twelve films Chaplin made at Mutual. In *Easy Street* (1917), for example, he plays a vagabond who is recruited to work as a beat cop in a dangerous neighborhood. Through dumb luck and a little ingenuity he subdues a neighborhood bully (Eric Campbell) by comically knocking him out with the gas from a streetlight, and then (in what audiences no doubt found an absurd, comic conclusion) he leads the slum dwellers on the road to redemption, or at least down the street to the New Hope Mission.

The eight comedy shorts Chaplin made for First National—*A Dog's Life* (1918), *Shoulder Arms* (1918), *Sunnyside* (1919), *A Day's Pleasure* (1919), *The Kid* (1921), *The Idle Class* (1921), *Pay Day* (1922), and *The Pilgrim* (1923)—toy with audience expectations regarding the Little Tramp. To wring out original gags, Chaplin placed his signature character in implausible situations and settings. The Tramp is cast as a soldier in *Shoulder Arms*, a farmer in *Sunnyside*, a working stiff

in *Pay Day*, and most unbelievably, a preacher in the 59-minute *Pilgrim*. Chaplin hoped that such situation-based comedies might help him make the transition to feature-length narrative films but discovered that the situations offered little more than a frame for his slapstick gags.

Chaplin's first important comedy feature was *The Gold Rush*, released in 1925 amid a paternity scandal (involving Lita Grey) that followed very soon after the Hearst-Ince incident. Despite Chaplin's personal struggles and the fan-magazine gossip, the film was a huge success commercially and artistically.

The Gold Rush begins on Chilkoot Pass, a perilous mountain crossing on the way to the Alaskan goldfields that was first captured on film in a documentary by Robert Bonine and Thomas Crahan for Edison in 1898. Chaplin's Little Tramp is introduced as just one of many hopeful prospectors. But while the other prospectors dress in furs and snowshoes, the Tramp wears his usual tattered suit and oversize shoes and obviously walks his signature walk on the icy narrow ledge. The Tramp is of course ill suited to both the locale and the lusty, rugged endeavor—and that's the point. The first gag in the film begins with a bit of ballet on the perilous ledge. The Tramp stumbles, then regains his balance. His stumbling awakens a bear that follows discreetly along the ledge. We see the bear as it nears the Tramp, but Chaplin remains, as always, blissfully oblivious. Just as it seems inevitable that the two will cross paths, the bear enters a cave and decides not to come back out. The Tramp travels on, unaware of the danger he has narrowly avoided.

Chaplin cast himself alongside fellow Sennett veteran Mack Swain as the appropriately named Big Jim. Throughout the film, much is made of their size difference—in silent film, comedy depends on simple dynamic oppositions, like big and small, masculine and feminine, ugly and beautiful. Chaplin is immediately cowed by Swain's bulk, and when they team up to prospect for gold, he willingly takes on the role of housekeeper and sidekick. Since the Tramp is systematically made to appear weak and unmanly, we find unlikely his romance with the film's beautiful female lead, Georgia (Georgia Hale), a barmaid accustomed to far rougher company. Here Chaplin fully indulges his sentimental side, but with a key caveat: the

(left) Charlie Chaplin and Mack Swain as unlikely housemates in Chaplin's classic silent feature *The Gold Rush* (1925).



(top) The house as teeter-totter, one of the classic gags in Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925).



(bottom) At the end of *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), Georgia (Georgia Hale) finally falls in love with the Little Tramp (Chaplin), only to discover he's a millionaire.

effeminate and weak male character offers more than meets the eye (just as the roughnecks offer less). In one scene the Tramp spies Georgia waving in his direction. He smiles in anticipation as she walks toward him, only to discover that there's another guy behind him, a rugged prospector with whom Georgia passes the time in the bar. In a later scene, Georgia and some friends stop by Big Jim's house. They poke gentle fun at the Tramp and in jest make a date to stop by for dinner on New Year's Eve. They stand him up, and he compensates for the pain with a comic daydream in which Georgia and her friends find him attractive.

The film's most famous stunt involves a house set adrift in a blizzard. Big Jim and the Tramp are

reunited after the former finds, and then loses, a site rich in gold (in a struggle he takes a hit in the head and suffers amnesia). When the wind finally subsides, the house is left teetering on the edge of a cliff, and the two men try to keep themselves and the house from slipping into an abyss. After a sequence made brilliant by camera tricks and stunts—the house for much of the time is just a big, heavy seesaw—the exhausted characters find themselves at the very site of Big Jim's claim. As in many other Chaplin films, luck is more important than design or skill, especially where money is concerned.

The final gag finds the Tramp suddenly a millionaire and a celebrity aboard a steamer heading south. No doubt audiences saw this conclusion as a clever bit of self-parody: Chaplin was a celebrity and could afford to poke fun at the unpredictable sequence of events that had made his success possible. On a lower deck is Georgia: feeling bad about the way she treated the Tramp (and unaware of his change in fortune), she is seeking a new and maybe more civilized life away from the frozen north. The press is onboard to celebrate the Tramp's good fortune, and for a photo shoot a newspaperman persuades the Tramp to exchange his millionaire's duds (two big fur coats worn over a neat suit) for his prospector's outfit (his Tramp costume, of course). The Tramp complies, and while posing for photographers, he stumbles backward and falls onto the lower deck, landing just a few feet from Georgia. A ship's officer mistakes the Tramp for a stowaway, as does Georgia. Georgia generously offers to pay the Tramp's fare, to save him from the brig. Her bighearted gesture is met with an even bigger-hearted one on the Tramp's part as he leads her up to the luxury deck as his fiancée. The film ends happily if ridiculously, and many viewers were no doubt struck by the interesting and ironic counterpoint to the way matters were playing out for Chaplin, whose marriage (to Lita Grey) had become a much-publicized disaster.

Chaplin continued making important movies into the sound era, though he took his time adapt-

ing to the advent of synchronous sound. Through the 1930s he made what were for the most part silent features, using sound only to make the music and the sound effects consistent from print to print. In other words, Chaplin made the transition to sound by not making the transition, by insisting that his work transcended technological and social change. Though Chaplin's three most important sound-era films—*City Lights* (1931), *Modern Times* (1936), and even *The Great Dictator* (1940)—seem very much locked in the past, they nonetheless contain some of his most ambitious and most complex work.

City Lights neatly fits subtle physical gags into a larger romantic plot involving a blind woman (Virginia Cherrill) and the tramp she believes to be a millionaire. He's not a millionaire, of course, but he knows one and eventually gets the money to pay for an operation that might restore her sight. The operation is a success, and she is cured, but he, as a consequence, is out of the picture. Now she can

see him not for who he is (a kind man who loves her) but for what he is (a tramp), and he exits the film aware that his good deed has made their romance impossible.

Essential to *Modern Times* are some of Chaplin's best pantomime sequences: the feeding-machine scene, for example, in which the Little Tramp is victimized by automation—slapped in the face, pelted with processed-food morsels, and drenched with hot soup; the jailhouse dance sequence, which culminates in the cocaine-addled Tramp somehow foiling a jailbreak; and a risqué gag in which the Tramp, unable to stop twitching his arms (having been turning bolts all day), can't help but try to undo the buttons on the dress worn by a woman he chases down the street. To Chaplin's credit, the sexually suggestive gag offers a clever critique of Fordist labor methods.

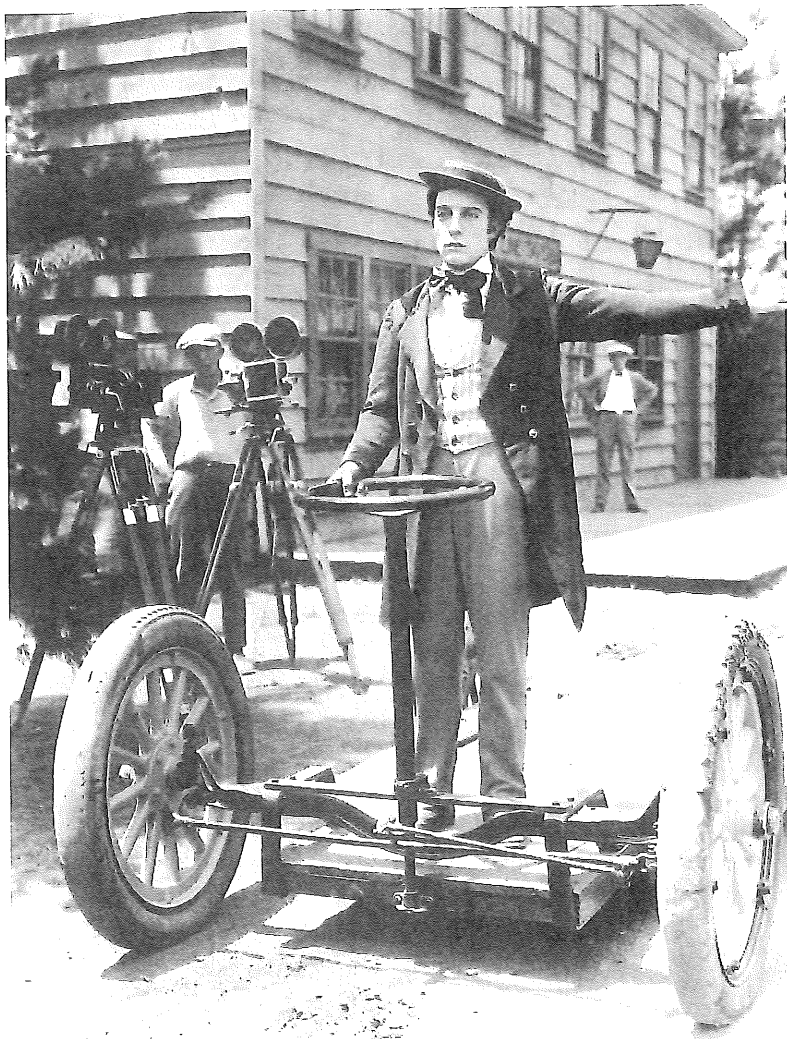
The Great Dictator, Chaplin's last box-office success, presents a political satire—and for once a full-fledged comedy narrative—playing off the physical



From left to right: Buster Keaton, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, and Al St. John in the knockabout farce *Out West* (Arbuckle, 1918).

resemblance between his Little Tramp and the German chancellor Adolf Hitler. (A rumor at the time held that Chaplin was Jewish, adding further irony to the mix. He wasn't but nevertheless allowed the rumor to circulate.) The best-known scene is a classic Chaplin pantomime in which the Hitler look-alike juggles a balloon that bears on its surface a map of the world.

In the 1940s, Chaplin, no longer a major moviemaker, ran into problems with Federal Bureau of Investigation chief J. Edgar Hoover. After a decade of political accusations and another paternity scandal, Chaplin left Hollywood for Switzerland. He would remain in exile for twenty years, returning finally in 1972 to accept an honorary Oscar.



Buster Keaton

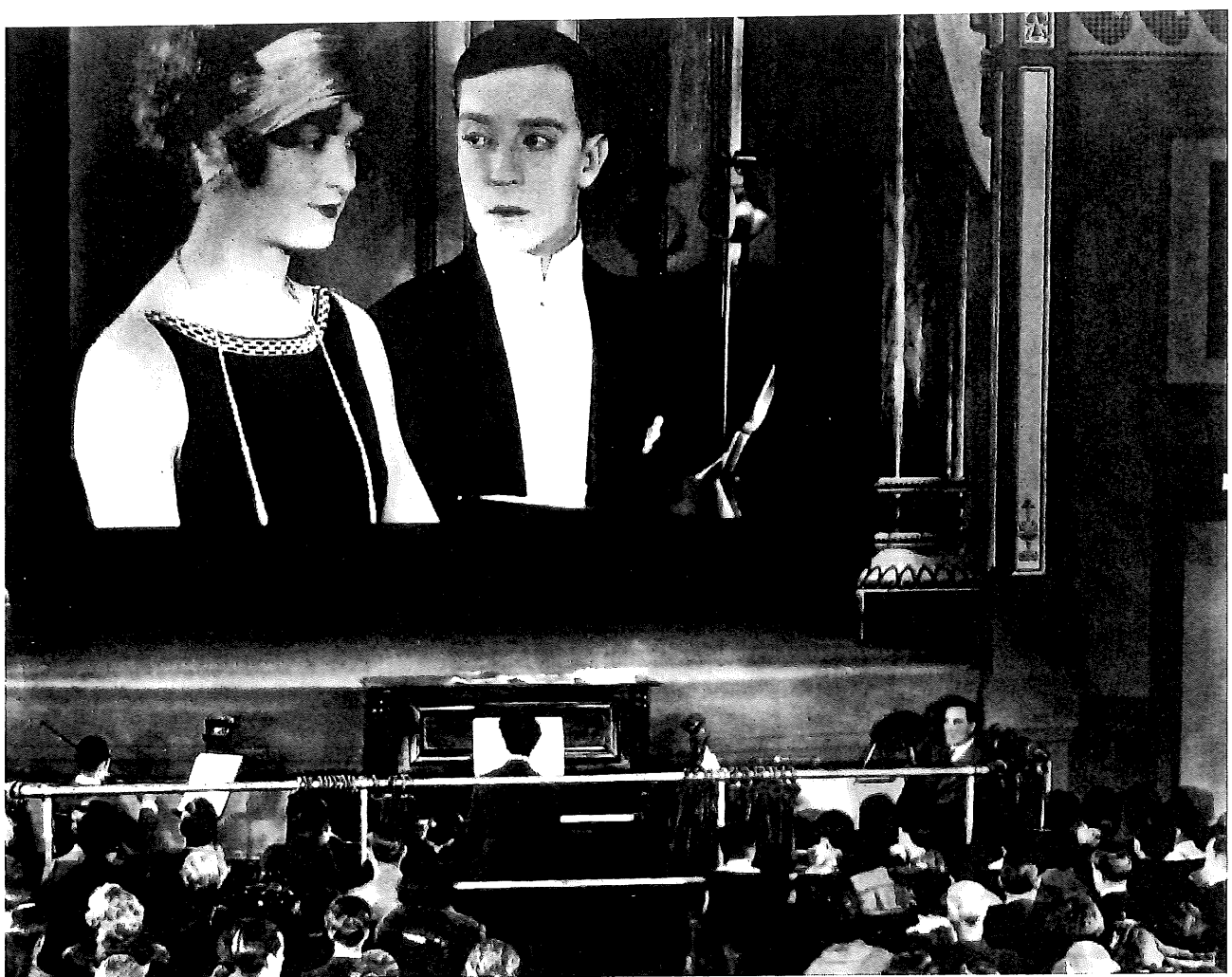
Joseph Francis Keaton debuted on the vaudeville stage at the tender age of three. He joined his parents, Joe and Myra, and the Two Keatons became the Three Keatons. The act consisted of little more than serial brutality performed on young Buster, who would miraculously emerge from every fracas indifferent and mostly uninjured. In some incarnations of the act, Buster would be made up as a little man, complete with mustache and beard. But the essence of the act was always the same: pure knockabout comedy.

By 1917, Buster Keaton was a vaudeville headliner earning \$250 a week. When he made the move to film later that year, his starting salary was a scant \$40 a week, and he was suddenly very much a second banana to the very popular comedy star Fatty Arbuckle. As things played out, the salary cut was temporary, and Keaton became one of silent cinema's great comedy stars.

Keaton's first appearance on-screen was a memorable bit in an Arbuckle short, *The Butcher Boy* (1917). He makes his entrance walking slowly, back to the camera, "changing the pace of the film on the spot. Next comes a comic bit in which he tosses brooms into a bin and then a series of gags involving Arbuckle and some spilled molasses: Arbuckle gets molasses in Keaton's hat. The hat gets stuck, and Arbuckle tries to pull it off. Keaton remains passive and expressionless as Arbuckle tosses him around the set and then hurls him out the door. Here, as in subsequent Arbuckle films, Keaton proved to be the fat comedian's perfect foil, a paragon of restraint and control amid the chaos. As in so many of the later films on his own, Keaton's stone-faced persona is unflappable, untouchable. He is at once the unluckiest guy in the world (the stuff that happens to him could happen only to him) and the luckiest, because he seems so small and inept, yet he emerges unharmed from the most outrageous scrapes and mishaps.

In 1919, after two years of making films with Arbuckle, Keaton became a movie star in his own right. After signing with Joseph Schenck, his wife's brother-in-law, Keaton was given his own

Man and machine: Buster Keaton in a gag from his 1923 feature *Our Hospitality* (Keaton and John Blystone).



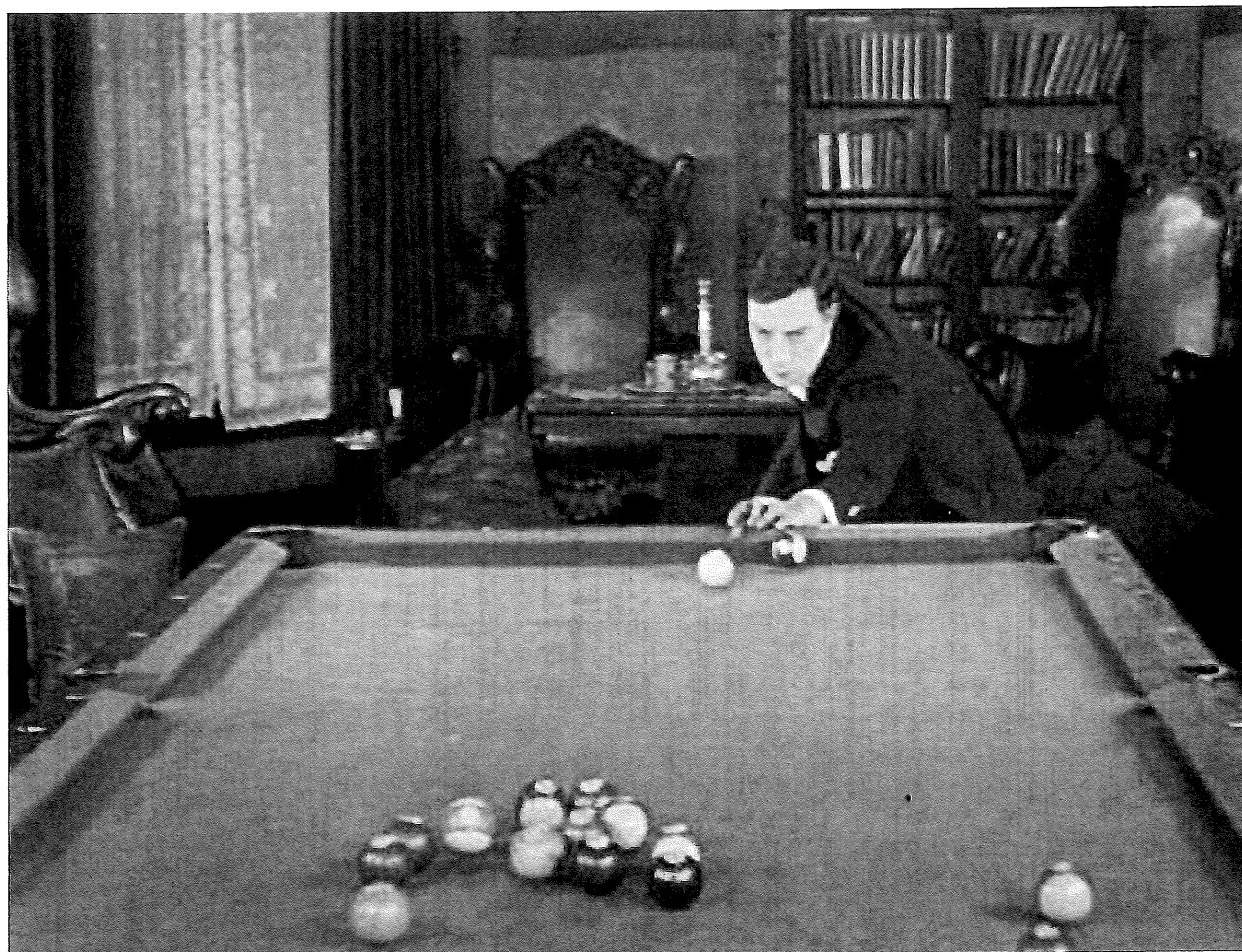
Kathryn McGuire and Buster Keaton in the film-within-a-film in *Sherlock Jr.* (Keaton, 1924).

production studio, and in exchange for the promise of eight short films a year the comedy star received \$1,000 a week and a good deal of artistic freedom. Working for Schenck, Keaton produced several memorable two-reelers, including *One Week* (Keaton and Edward Cline, 1920) and *Cops* (Keaton and Cline, 1922).

In the closing scene of *One Week*, Keaton tows a strange-looking build-it-yourself house across town (it looks strange because a rival changed the labels on the modular parts). The house gets stuck on some railroad tracks. Keaton positioned the camera so that we see a train approaching and are sure will hit the house. But it doesn't because what we can't see is that the train is on a parallel track. The take continues as Keaton and his co-star, Sybil Seely, breathe a sigh of relief. But the respite is brief, for a second train comes suddenly into the frame and obliterates the house. The gag works because the first time the camera position fools us, and the second time it prevents us from seeing the payoff until it is too late.

Cops offers Keaton's variation on the sort of hectic chase comedy that Sennett made famous at Keystone. Watching the film today, one finds it hard not to be impressed by Keaton's athletic ability in stunts involving swinging ladders and moving vehicles. But in 1922, *Cops* took on a more timely significance: the film, released just as Arbuckle was mired in scandal, focuses on a man who is falsely accused. (Keaton, incidentally, remained loyal to his old friend long after the studios had blackballed him.)

Keaton's transition to feature-length films, in 1923, was less abrupt than Chaplin's, if only because Keaton rarely tried to make a coherent feature-length narrative; for him features just meant bigger and better stunts. At the end of the feature *Seven Chances* (1925), for example, Keaton's film about a young man who must marry within 24 hours in order to pocket his inheritance, the stone-faced hero is chased to the edge of a cliff by an army of eager would-be brides. He runs down the hill just as a rockslide commences. The



Sherlock Jr. (Buster Keaton) setting up the first of several amazing trick shots that all somehow avoid the thirteen ball (in which the villains have planted a bomb). As with so many gags in *Sherlock Jr.* (Keaton, 1924), the bit depends on amazing physical skill and deft sleight of hand, a nod to Keaton's mentor, the magician-escape artist Harry Houdini.

falling pebbles and stones become, by the end of the stunt, giant boulders, which Keaton must avoid in order to survive. With Keaton such an interplay between man and nature lies at the very center of the comic universe. There are forces bigger than we can imagine—rapids and waterfalls, as in *Our Hospitality* (Keaton and John Blystone, 1923), for example, or storms that topple houses, as in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (Keaton and Charles Reisner, 1928)—but Keaton always manages to keep his cool.

Though it features the slimmest of narratives, Keaton's most compelling feature is *Sherlock Jr.* (Keaton, 1924). The film opens with Keaton portraying a projectionist sweeping up after a show. In classic three-part gag form, Keaton steps on a piece of paper (which sticks to his shoe), removes

it with his hand (to which it gets stuck), and then calmly slaps it onto the back of a passerby (who thus carries it offscreen). Then, as he lackadaisically sweeps up outside the theater, he finds a dollar bill. The dollar, we discover, should come in handy, because he wants to buy the object of his affections (Kathryn McGuire) an expensive box of candy. But before he can leave work for the candy store, a pretty woman shows up saying that she has lost a dollar. Reluctantly he hands over the money. Next, an old woman drops by looking for a dollar that she has lost, and he gives her one of his own two bills. Finally—the joke comes in three parts here, too—a thug arrives, and he also says he has lost something. The projectionist hands him his last dollar, in part because the guy is so big but

mostly because everything seems so futile; he is just unlucky. But the thug returns the dollar because, as we discover after he rummages through the pile of debris that the projectionist has swept up, he has lost (but now finds) a wallet filled with cash.

After switching on the projector for the next show, the projectionist quickly falls asleep. Dreaming, he has an out-of-body experience (depicted in a clever use of superimposed imagery). The projectionist's dream self takes a wonderful pratfall, diving into an orchestra pit (a version of a gag Keaton performed many times in vaudeville: the Three Keatons ended their act with Joe tossing Buster into the pit). Keaton quickly segues into a play on film form as the projectionist dives into the movie on-screen, a silly melodrama titled *Hearts and Pearls*. In *Hearts and Pearls* the projectionist falls victim to the film's editing scheme. We see the projectionist fall off a bench in a garden and land in a busy city street. He walks, and the film cuts to the edge of a cliff. He stops in time and looks ahead, and the film cuts to a lion's den. As he slowly backs out of the den, watching the lions all the while, he finds himself in the Old West and is nearly run down by a train. He sits on the ground, and suddenly he is on a rock in the ocean. He dives off the rock and lands headfirst in the snow. He leans on a tree, and he is back in the garden by the bench we saw in the first shot in the sequence.

When Keaton played vaudeville, he shared the bill on occasion with the legendary escape artist Harry Houdini—it was Houdini who gave Buster his nickname. As Keaton told the story, one day when he was very young, he fell down a flight of stairs. Houdini saw the fall, laughed, and said, "That sure was a buster!" The name stuck. In addition to giving him his screen name, Houdini taught Keaton that a well-executed stunt depends on a game of show and tell. That lesson is clearly demonstrated in *Sherlock Jr.* In the film within a film, the projectionist becomes Sherlock Jr., master detective. This alter ego is at once as silly as the projectionist (he is just as shy and fumbling around his girlfriend) but supernaturally athletic and agile (hardly how one would describe the projectionist). He enters the mansion where the drama of *Hearts and Pearls* plays out, where a villain and his cohort (Ward Crane and Joe Keaton) plot to

kill Sherlock Jr. before he can solve the crime (by identifying who stole some missing jewels). The cohort shows us an exploding number 13 pool ball, pours some poison into a glass, and demonstrates a chair rigged with an ax that might be used to eliminate the detective. Sherlock Jr. almost sits several times but gets distracted each time. The glasses get switched, so the poisoning attempt is foiled. Finally, the pool game begins. The villains exit the room and wait for the explosion. But it does not come. First Keaton performs a series of amazing trick shots, in which somehow the thirteen ball is untouched although other balls fly about the table. The gag is dragged out: the detective scratches, and the villains must return to the room and shoot again. At last the detective plays the thirteen ball and banks it in. No explosion. Keaton finally reintroduces the exploding thirteen ball in the film's climactic comic chase, only after several other gags intervene.

Late in the film, Sherlock Jr. allows himself to be captured, but only after placing a woman's dress in a box outside the hideout's window. After a comic scuffle, Sherlock Jr. jumps out the window and through the box. He lands on his feet, having been transformed into what appears to be a woman wearing the dress he had put in the box. Keaton repeats this gag a few minutes later when he seems to jump through the stomach of his trusty assistant, Gillette, who bears a striking resemblance to his waking-life boss in the theater (Ford West plays both roles). The bad guys (and the audience as well) wonder not only where he is but also how he performed the stunt. Having learning his lesson from Houdini, Keaton never lets on.

Like many silent comedies, *Sherlock Jr.* has as its centerpiece a comic chase. The challenge to the comedian is to make the chase different and interesting, and in Keaton's case that translated into making it more dangerous and more risky. Early in the sequence he gets locked on a roof. The bad guys drive away, but the detective grabs hold of a railroad-crossing barrier and uses it to vault into the back of the bad guy's car. In the same sequence, Keaton rides on the handlebars of a motorcycle driven by his assistant. The assistant falls off, but the detective, unaware, rides on. He weaves in and out of traffic, gets pelted with sand by a road crew, crosses a half-built bridge at the precise moment it is made whole by two trucks crossing under the



Harold Lloyd, the bespectacled Everyman, proved irresistible to Roaring Twenties audiences.

unfinished portion, and finally avoids a log in the road when it is dynamited in half just as he drives through it.

Sherlock Jr. is mostly a short expanded to feature length. The longer running time enabled Keaton to set up, execute, and punctuate his gags more painstakingly, but the narrative thread is as thin as it is in any Keaton short. A far better effort at narrative is made in Keaton's subsequent and best-known feature, *The General* (Keaton and Clyde Bruckman, 1927). Though it has its share of elaborate stunts (using as a centerpiece a train hurtling down the tracks) and showcases the comedian's ability to risk life and limb without expressing any emotion, *The General* integrates the gags into a cogent narrative—in this instance about an

unlucky loser who is rejected by the Confederate army and tries to prove himself (to a young woman, of course) by rescuing a train that has been hijacked by the Union army. The film climaxes with a comic chase after the young man steals the train back and tries to return home; it ends with a sweet scene between the comic hero and the girl (Marion Mack).

Just as the silent era was coming to a close, Keaton signed with MGM. There he locked horns with Thalberg and Mayer, both of whom maintained hands-on control over production and regarded actors strictly as employees. Forced to follow scripted scenes closely and prohibited from staging dangerous stunts (Mayer wanted him to use a stuntman!), Keaton became depressed and descended into alcoholism. The last films that billed him as a star were attempts to team him with the nightclub motormouthed comic Jimmy Durante. It was a profound indignity. Keaton appeared in nearly sixty features after the advent of sound, though mostly in walk-on roles, as in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and Richard Lester's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966).

Harold Lloyd

Unlike Chaplin and Keaton and so many other stars of comedy films in the 1920s, Harold Lloyd was never a vaudeville performer of any note. He was just an extra, a veteran of cameos and walk-ons. It was while working as an extra that Lloyd first met and befriended a fellow supernumerary named Hal Roach. When Roach inherited some money, he quit working as an extra and took a stab at moviemaking, and he asked his friend and fellow extra to come along for the ride. The rest, as they say, is history. Lloyd became one of the silent era's biggest stars, and Roach became a successful producer, eventually credited with over one thousand short films and features, including several Laurel and Hardy titles and the entire *Our Gang* series (known as *The Little Rascals* when released for television).

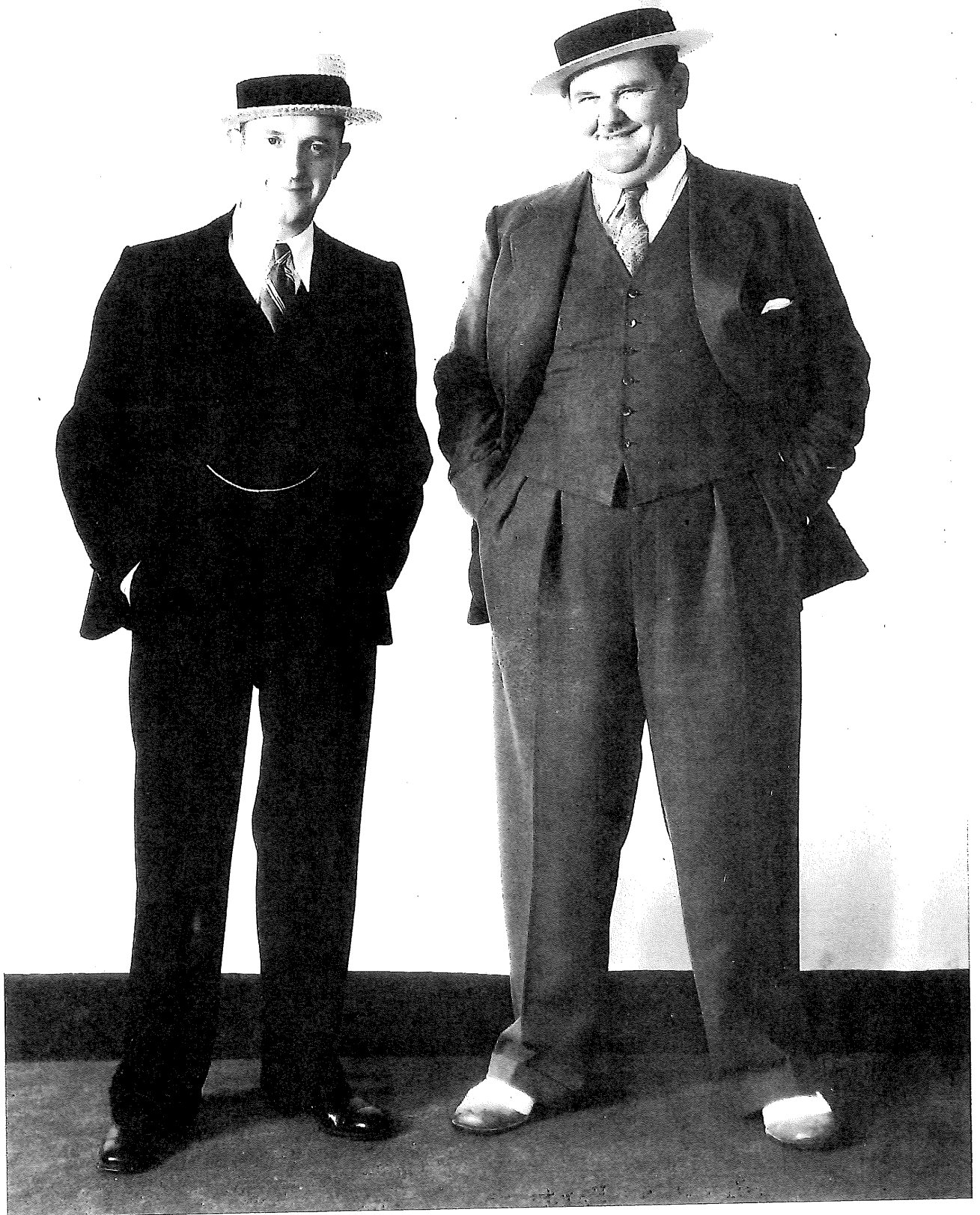
(right) Harold Lloyd's death-defying high and dizzy in *Safety Last!* (Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, 1923).

Working for Roach, Lloyd first experimented with a character named Lonesome Luke, an obvious nod to Chaplin's Little Tramp. While Chaplin wore baggy clothes and huge clown's shoes, Lloyd (as Luke) donned an outfit that looked a couple of sizes too small. The Lonesome Luke pictures were moderately successful, but Lloyd soon tired of playing a stock character. Unlike Chaplin and Keaton, whose screen characters were very much a matter of stylized performance, Lloyd fashioned for himself a far more natural and naturalized persona, a quiet, boyish comic Everyman with an optimism that proved irresistible in the Roaring Twenties.

Lloyd made more than one hundred one- and two-reelers between 1916 and 1919 but became a star only after he ditched Lonesome Luke and

began making features and playing a new character with 1922 *Grandma's Boy* (Fred C. Newmeyer). Whereas Chaplin's waddle masked a dancer's grace and Keaton's stony face was a counterpoint to his acrobatic stunts, Lloyd's bespectacled mild-mannered character only appeared to be uncoordinated. Lloyd himself was an amazing athlete. His most famous stunt—and it may be the greatest stunt in silent-film comedy—comes near the end of *Safety Last!* (Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, 1923) as the pale-faced country boy (Lloyd) climbs the face of a skyscraper to win \$1,000. His twelve-story ascent is beset by a series of comically perilous encounters—with pesky pigeons, a flying painter's scaffold, a net, a vicious dog, a mouse climbing up his pant leg, a man who is menacingly pointing a gun in his direction (but is actually posing for a





photograph), and finally a giant clock that suddenly comes loose from the building. The gag is a classic high and dizzy, a stunt at once dangerous and funny. Lloyd followed up *Safety Last!* with *The Freshman* (Newmeyer and Taylor, 1925), his much-copied collegiate-sports spoof—see the Marx Brothers comedy *Horse Feathers* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1932), the Dean Martin–Jerry Lewis feature *That's My Boy* (Hal Walker, 1951), and the Adam Sandler vehicle *The Waterboy* (Frank Coraci, 1998) for homages. It was a huge success.

From the start, Lloyd was lucky, like the characters in his features. He met Roach by chance and was with Roach at the right time: when he suddenly got rich. Lloyd's rise to stardom after *Grandma's Boy* occurred at a time when Chaplin was relatively inactive. By the end of the silent era, Lloyd had surpassed Chaplin and Keaton at the box office, and by 1928 he was the most popular and the most wealthy of the big three comedy stars of the era. But the goofy optimist persona that was perfect for the America of the 1920s and made Lloyd in many ways the ideal Jazz Age comedian—a wide-eyed optimist, a go-getter—did not play well after the stock-market crash of 1929, and Lloyd, like Keaton, did not make a successful transition to sound.

Laurel and Hardy

Stan Laurel understudied Chaplin while both were members of the Karno comedy troupe. In 1913, when Chaplin quit Karno for Sennett and Keystone, Laurel quit as well, to try his hand at American vaudeville. After some success onstage, he ventured west to make movies. Success did not come quickly or easily, however. By the time Laurel formally teamed up with Oliver Hardy, in 1927, he had retired as a performer and was earning his living writing gags and directing two-reelers. Hardy was at the time a serviceable screen heavy in melodramas and comedies, which is to say that he was a character actor making a decent living playing tough and bad guys. Alone, neither was anything like a movie star.

Laurel first appeared with Hardy in a forgettable 1921 two-reeler titled *A Lucky Dog* (Jess Robbins), and the two did not meet again professionally until 1926, when Hardy was cast in *Get 'Em Young* (Laurel and Fred Guiol). During the shoot, Hardy burned himself in a cooking accident, and Laurel left the director's chair to play his part. When Hardy returned to the set, he was asked to play a different role, and something between the two very-different-looking men seemed to click. The following year, Laurel and Hardy co-starred in *Slipping Wives* (Guiol), produced by Roach. The film was a hit, and the duo decided to work as a team.

Putting Pants on Philip (Bruckman, 1927) is the first true Laurel and Hardy picture, and its success led to ten Laurel and Hardy two-reelers the following year, including *Leave 'Em Laughing* (Bruckman), which features a terrific laughing-gas gag in which the two men become intoxicated and cause a horrible traffic jam; *From Soup to Nuts* (Edgar Kennedy), in which they make a mess of a society dinner party; and the brilliant *Two Tars* (James Parrott), which is almost entirely composed of the joyous destruction of property during a traffic jam. The comic formula for the team was simple: the two men aspire to bourgeois society, but their ambitions are thwarted; rejected and dejected, they descend into anarchy. The destruction is cathartic, hilarious, and liberating.

Though Hardy was the so-called brains of the outfit on screen, Laurel was the creative force behind the team. He directed virtually all their films (even as other men got credit for standing behind the camera when Laurel himself was on-screen), and he mapped out the gags as well. Hardy liked to show up on the set, do his job, and head home (or to the golf course).

In 1929, after making yet another popular slapstick two-reeler, *Big Business* (James W. Horne and Leo McCarey), Laurel and Hardy made a smooth transition to sound. Their voices were as contradictory as their physiques: the burly Hardy had a deep voice; the slight Laurel spoke in a squeaky, high-pitched way that made him sound like he was on the verge of crying. Laurel and Hardy, unlike Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd, were not making features when sound films became the norm in 1928, and they did not work for a big studio. Though they tried their hand at feature filmmaking as early

(left) Stan Laurel (left) and Oliver Hardy, the premier comedy team of silent and early sound cinema.



Laurel and Hardy's *Two Tars* (James Parrott, 1928) is composed almost entirely of the joyous destruction of property during a traffic jam. Here we see the comedy team tearing the bumpers off of a car.

as 1931, with *Pardon Us* (Parrott, 1931) and *Pack Up Your Troubles* (George Marshall, Ray McCarey, and others, 1932), they were far more successful (artistically at least) making two-reelers for exhibitors still providing full film programs (including A and B features and assorted short subjects) in the late 1920s and early '30s. Their best film in the sound era was the Academy Award-winning *Music Box* (Parrott, 1932), a simple two-reel gag film about two men trying to get a piano up a flight of stairs. *The Music Box* could just as easily have been a silent film.

When the market for shorts diminished and the team turned exclusively to features, Laurel and Hardy's success as comedians and their popularity with audiences declined. Most famous among their features is the silly Christmas film *Babes in Toyland* (Gus Meins and Charley Rogers, 1934), and there's one great gag involving a piano, a precipice, and a gorilla in *Swiss Miss* (Blystone and Roach, 1938). But otherwise, for Laurel and Hardy (as for so many other comedians whose careers began in the silent-film era), the short-film format proved to be ideal.

Between 1893 and 1914, moving pictures were transformed from a technological curiosity into a viable commercial art form. Over the following ten years the transition from an industry controlled by the East Coast MPPC to one managed by the West Coast Hollywood studio system was made complete, and with the transfer of power came a transition from short subjects to features, the first giant step toward a modern film industry.

By the end of the silent era, the studios were run much as they would be through the so-called classical era (see Chapter 3). A system of contracted labor was in force, and the production, distribution, and exhibition of studio films—no less a monopoly operation than the MPPC model had been—was devised in concert with Fordist ideas then prevalent. The founding of the MPPDA in 1922 not only promised to rein in wayward movie stars and establish production guidelines but also made clear the studios' desire to cooperate with one another for the betterment of the industry as a whole. The policies and procedures instituted by the MPPDA and adopted by the member studios went a long way toward making the industry more professional and more profitable.

With increased sophistication in the operation of the movie business came significant advances in

artistic accomplishment. While movie stars dominated the fan magazines and remained the reason many folks went to the movies, an elite group of film directors began to explore the possibilities of moviemaking more fully. For the commercial enterprise of American cinema, the balance between movies and money is often tipped in favor of commerce. Only through the ingenuity and persistence of those making the movies can the creative end keep up. Key players in the early evolution of film as art were D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd—filmmakers who, despite the restrictions of such a commercial and industrial art, made movies of transcendent quality and profound influence.

Silent film accounted for the first thirty years of American filmmaking. When sound film was introduced in 1926 and adopted industry-wide in 1928, silent film was still very popular. But as things played out, the two media's peaceful coexistence was impossible. The technology involved in producing and exhibiting sound films was sufficiently different from that used in the production and exhibition of silent film. So in a matter of two years, silent film disappeared forever from the American popular culture, and a new American cinema was born.
